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FEATURE STORY

THE SILKEN SHEATH

BY CRITTENDEN MARRIOTT..

"A FORTUNE TELLER'S SECRET" in the Next Number. READ IT!

MYSTERY MAGAZINE
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The Silken Sheath

A STRANGE STORY OF THE "WHITE DEATH"

By CRITTENDEN MARRIOTT, author of "Sally Castleton, Southerner," etc.

CHAPTER ONE

"I BEG your pardon, sir." Rafferty stopped; he had been pushing his way, elbows out, through the crowd that choked the narrow pavement and slopped over into the mire of the street—a parti-colored crowd that chattered and laughed greatly for no perceptible cause. Rafferty knew that there were a few white men scattered about the city of Para, and that two or three might be mingled in the throng on the Linguada; but he had noticed none, and both the plaintive and high-pitched voice and the touch on his arm came as a surprise.

When he turned to look, another surprise awaited him in the appearance of two who had accosted him. The elder was a little, frail old man with pale blue eyes, which looked timidly through large, gold-rimmed spectacles. His dress was neat and precise and his manner trim and orderly. Rafferty was no Sherlock Holmes, and his perceptions at the moment were not of the clearest, but he instantly set the man down as somebody from Boston, probably a scholar—the signs were too unmistakable to permit hesitation. The younger of the two might have been the son of the older. He had blue eyes also, and small, delicate features, as delicate as those of a girl; his air was not so timid, however, and his clothes had a certain looseness and easiness that those of the elder probably never had, even in the long-gone days of his youth. He seemed to be about sixteen years old.

Rafferty took all this in at a glance; but he did not notice that a yellowish-brown man—a man hued like an overripe lemon—had halted near-by and stood listening. He put out his hand. "Howdy, professor," he said; "howdy! How are all the folks at Beantown?" He grinned over the other's shoulder at the boy as he spoke.

The "professor" took the proffered hand with some hesitation; Rafferty's excessive geniality seemed to disturb him. "Not 'professor' except by courtesy, sir," he said formally. "I have never been so far honored. Mr. James Meekerton, assistant curator of the Harlem Arboretum, at your service; this is my son Francis."

Rafferty nodded at the boy again. "My name's Rafferty," he said; "Tom Rafferty, and sure I'm from the little old place on the Hudson, too, though I'm from a few miles south of Goatville. But it's born in the old country I was, and they tell me there's times when I have a touch of the brogue."

The professor hesitated, but the boy spoke up. "I had not observed it," he remarked politely.

Rafferty shrugged his shoulders. "I misdoubt it's lying you are," he commenced cheerfully, "meaning no offense by saying that same; but no matter. The ice-house across the way is on the blink, I fancy; but sure it'll have something wet to offer. Will it plaze you to come over with me?"

Mr. Meekerton hesitated. "I hope you'll excuse me," he pleaded; "I seldom drink, and you yourself—that is——"

"Say it, professor, say it; it's my number you've got, all right. I misdoubt I've had a drink too many, and I hope you'll excuse it."

"Certainly; but——"

"Then come and have a cup of coffee with me or a glass of what these beknighted greasers think is soda-water. It's all sorts of lady drinks they have at most of these ice-houses; come along." Rafferty pushed through the crowd to where a café with its whole front missing opened brazenly.

He did not notice that the brownish-yellow man had detached himself from the crowd and followed.

The air was languorous with the scent of orange-blossoms—and offal. Scurrying señoritas, with fireflies tangled in their hair, glanced at the mismated trio as they passed, then settled their eyes on Rafferty, for the Irishman was a personable man. Rafferty seated his guests at one of the little iron tables that besprinkled the red-tiled floor. "It's foregathering with the consul I've been," he explained, "and sure he led me astray, so he did; but it's on the water-wagon I am now. What'll you drink, professor?"

Mr. Meekerton sighed, but he did not again disavow the title. "I am not familiar with the beverages here," he said. "If you will be kind enough to select those that you think appropriate, I shall be pleased."

"Sure!" Rafferty's eyes twinkled; they were good-looking eyes, friendly and merry, and they looked as if they were accustomed to twinkle. "Here, muchaco," he called, beckoning to the slip-looking youth in heel-less slippers. "Siropa grosella, para tres!" he ordered. "Mucho hielo! Mucho! Sabe?" Then he turned to the professor. "It's syrups for the bunch I've ordered," he explained. "They're pretty good when you've got plenty of ice, so they are."

The lemon-skinned man came softly into the café, seated himself at a table close to Rafferty's, and began to absorb a glass of sugared water.

Rafferty had had a drink too much in the sense that any drink is too much; but he had not had enough to much more than exhilarate him. It was certainly not the drink that set him to wondering what in Tophet had brought the pair opposite him to the God-forsaken hole in the north coast of South America, where he had found them. Mr. Meekerton's announcement of his connection with the arboretum suggested that he might be a collector, but Rafferty could not imagine either the frail old man or his son roughing it in tropical wilds; he could scarcely imagine them in their present environment. His words were really a question.

Mr. Meekerton tasted his drink and set it down. "This is indeed refreshing," he remarked introspectively. "Grosella, I think you said it was called?"

Rafferty nodded. "Yes, grosella," he admitted; "that means gooseberry." His eyes flickered for a moment, then dimmed as he caught a glance of amused comprehension from the boy. "Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked hastily. "It's yours I am to command."

Mr. Meekerton nodded. "You are very kind," he said; "in truth, we find ourselves in something of a predicament. We landed here a week ago, hoping to find a friend awaiting us. He was not here, and we decided to go on to our destination at the mouth of the Paribo; but there seems to be no regular means of transportation and I hesitate to make the trip in a sailing-boat, as I suffer extremely from *mal-de-mer*. You were pointed out to me as Mr. Barnett, owner of the yacht *Pathfinder*, and——"

"Owner? Lord, no; though I'll not say that I wouldn't like to be. No, it's not plastered with yellow-backs I am. I'm by way of being a sort of secretary to the owner; but"—Rafferty spoke hastily as he read disappointment on the faces of his auditors—"never mind that. I'm in charge for the time being, and I'm going to sail for Paribo to-night, as I suppose somebody tipped you off, and it's mighty glad to take you along I'll be."

"Oh, thank you; thank you." The boy spoke first, and his father followed with a sedate "We are indeed grateful."

"Not a bit of it; it's a pity what Mr. Barnett would be wanting me to do."

"Is Mr. Barnett on board? I think he knew a—a friend of mine."

"He's not; sure I left him here six weeks ago to run back to New York to get some apparatus he was after wanting. To-day I find a letter from him, saying it's gone on to Paribo he has; so I'm going, and it's glad of your company for the voyage I'll be."

"Thank you." The professor reiterated his gratitude. "We will, of course, pay our way," he said.

"You will not. Sure Mr. Barnett would drop me overboard with a shot at my heels if I took money from any one from God's country."

"I am a medical man as much as a naturalist," said the professor. "I may say, however, that I am investigating with a view to collecting in the future. I understand that there is something entirely out of the ordinary to be found on the headwaters of the Paribo River, and I——"

Rafferty sat up with a jerk. "Is it the White Death you're meaning?" he demanded.

The professor glanced cautiously about him. "Don't speak so loud," he murmured uneasily; "the White Death is, I believe, the fanciful appellation bestowed upon it by a credulous——"

"Stow that!" Rafferty spoke with a snap; the last trace of whisky had gone abruptly out of him. "There's nothing fanciful about the White Death. God, no; it's real! I've seen its work." Rafferty's face was screwed up in horror.

At the next table the lemon-yellow man became even more absorbed in his sugared water, but his ears quivered with the effort to overhear.

"Really, that is very interesting!" The professor leaned forward, his face lighting up with interest. "Please tell me all you know. He turned to his son. "Get out your note-book, Francis," he ordered. Then to Rafferty: "You will permit me to take notes, I hope, sir?"

"Take all the notes you like," Rafferty said. "They won't fill many books. Nobody knows what the White Death is. The Indians say it's a devil; but sure they say the same of anything they don't understand. Some white men think it's a disease, and some think it's a poison; one fellow I met swore it was some sort of an insect. But nobody's seen it and got away to tell. Bodies come down the river sometimes, floating high, covered with a long silky, white fringe or fungus—that is the mark of the White Death. It's one body I've seen, and that was enough for me. I'm no mollycoddle; I've been up against hell and high-water more than once, but never before or since have I seen anything like that horrible white mildew or the look on that man's face; and they tell me that the others that come down are just like it."

"Good!" The professor's eyes beamed. "Did you get all that, Francis?" he asked anxiously.

The boy nodded; his fingers were flying furiously, his whole body was shaking.

The professor, however, went on without noticing. "I think," he said to Rafferty, "that I may congratulate myself that my quest will be more interesting than I had hoped. I am indeed fortunate that I should have met with one who had actually seen the body of a victim and can testify that the whole story is not a mere figment of the imagination, as so many such stories are. I suppose you did not preserve a specimen of the—er—silky—er—fringe or mildew that enveloped the body?"

"I did not," Rafferty spoke shortly.

"Pardon me"—the professor noted the disapprobation in the other's tones—"I fear that I am prone to forget the human side of the matter and to remember only the scientific. An inspection of the—er—filaments would probably be of material aid in determining their origin. However, I suppose I shall be able to obtain specimens on the way up the river."

Rafferty stared. "It's intending to go up the Paribo you are?" he asked.

"Certainly; that is the chief object of my visit to this country. I had inferred from previous information that the White Death was some sort of an animal. I had hoped to arrange for bringing back a specimen for the Harlem Arboretum."

"Good Lord!"

"Your testimony, however, throws new light on the matter and makes the quest still more interesting. If it is indeed a disease I may be able to isolate the germ. Yes; it will be a very interesting investigation."

Rafferty lay back in his chair; he seemed rather breathless. "And how high up the Paribo do you expect to go?" he asked.

"That will depend on circumstances. I shall go to the home of this—er—White Death, perhaps to the very head of the river."

"You—you—good God! It's bug-house you both are, or it's drunk I am. Yes, I reckon that'll be it; it's drunk and seeing things I am. Get me back to the ship and lave me slape it off." Rafferty lay heavily back in his chair.

But the boy shook his head. "You're not even tipsy," he declared, a ghost of a smile curling his lips; "we're going."

"But you can't go." Rafferty straightened up. "Faith, you're not knowing what you're going against, and I do."

However, the professor shook his white head gently. "I'm bound to go," he said; "as for Francis——"

"I'm going, too!" The boy's eyes flew wide and the color flashed into his cheeks. "I'm going, too; you promised. I'm going whether you go or not."

"I'll keep my promise." The professor turned to Rafferty. "We're going," he said positively; "the question does not admit of argument."

Rafferty shrugged his shoulders. "All right," he said; "it's free, white, and twenty-one you are, and I can't stop you." He got up. "I suppose I ought to try to stop you by refusing you passage; but I won't. After all, it's your own business, it is. Come along; let's go to the boat and send after your baggage." He led the way to the sidewalk.

As the three stepped into the crowd on the sidewalk the yellowish-brown man got up and followed them, keeping a safe distance behind. Only when he saw them on board the *Pathfinder* did he quit the trail and hurry off into the maze of streets that opened off the Linguada.

CHAPTER TWO

PARIBO is an evil-smelling, dirty, picturesque town planted at the mouth of the Paribo River between the jungle and the sea. Its principal business is to exchange rubber for cottons, bangles and aguadiente.

In one of the cafés Rafferty was holding converse with John Geoffrey Barnett, owner—a tall, big, well-set-up but somewhat disreputably dressed young man.

"Here's a cablegram for you, Jack," said Rafferty, passing over a sealed envelope. "It was at the office, all right."

Barnett took the despatch, but showed no haste to open it. "I thought one might be there," he said; "but I didn't dare ask for it. I'll open it after a while. First tell me: You got the aeroplane, I suppose?"

Rafferty nodded. "Sure I did," he answered; "and a beauty it is."

"Good! Now tell me about those people you brought from Para with you."

Rafferty stared. "And how did you know I'd brought any one?" he asked.

"Saw them, of course, and liked their looks. Who are they?"

Rafferty shook his head. "Sure it's batty they are, Jack," he said; "bug-house the worst sort. It's used to granite pavements and steam-heated flats and soda-water drug-stores and other redundancies of civilization they are. Never in their lives have they been ten miles from the imitation jungle in the hothouse at the Harlem Zoo, and now nothing will do them but to go up the Paribo. The professor is going to chase the White Death, and sure he'll find it all right, so he will. The boy—— Well, it's going he is, and it isn't a single whoop he cares who knows it; but what he's going for I don't know. It's a whole sackful of beans they've got and mean to take up the river with them, and it's properly grateful to John Geoffrey Barnett they are for the transportation I gave them on his yacht, and, by the same token, the boy's sure you're after knowing a friend of his. The boy'll cook you beans to burn; but what I was after saying was that it's my best to stop them I've done, and they won't be stopped."

"They've got nerve, anyway; whether it'll last remains to be seen. Are they on board still?"

"Their baggage is; they've got a quarter of a ton of it, so they have, sir—a most God-forsaken collection of junk it is. I guess they made it up from a catalogue in the back of that wonderful volume, 'How Not to Do It.' I told them to look around a little first before they brought it ashore, and it's looking around now they are, trying to arrange for a boat to take them up to Curilla, where they are expecting to start out in their own canoe with some natives to paddle. I steered them against the rubber company and left them to make their own arrangements."

The tap-tap of heeled boots, very different from that of the soft zapatos worn by the natives, sounded on the tiles that ran without the threshold from the sidewalk into the café. Rafferty turned half around and looked through the screen of lattice and foliage behind him. "There they are now," he said, nodding at his companion.

Barnett leaned closer to the lattice and peered through it; then he whistled softly. "Gee! he's nice-looking," he muttered.

"Who, the old boy? Yes; he's——"

"No, you chump; the young boy! He's pretty as a girl; he's—— Thunder, that's Don Sabas with them!"

"And who is Don Sabas?" Rafferty bent over and peered through the lattice. "Some man, eh? He looks kind of roady—the sort that would be wanting to set the sun by his own watch, belike. Pity he's a dago."

The man of whom Rafferty spoke was undoubtedly a fine physical specimen of manhood. He was as tall as Barnett, though perhaps not quite so broad; he was young and handsome in Spanish-American style, with dark eyes, smooth cheeks and curly hair that gave no hint of any effeminacy. Except for the tell-tale tints in his skin he might have ranked with any one anywhere.

Barnett looked at him thoughtfully. "He's the big gun down here," he answered. "I wonder you haven't heard of him; exports rubber and imports all sorts of things, owns two or three steamboats and half a dozen stores along the coast. He bears a charmed life, too."

"A charmed which?"

"A charmed life. Some soothsayer soothed him a sooth, and no enemy could kill him till earth and sky joined to double-cross him. He believes it, and, what's more, lots of other people down here believe it, too. It's a big help to him; but listen."

Don Sabas had seated the Meekertons, and was ordering syrup for them.

The drinks came and with them a tall cup filled with flimsy pale, yellow straws. The professor reached for one and by some clumsiness knocked the cup off the edge of the table. Francis tried to catch it, but it slipped between his knees and crashed to the floor.

Barnett, watching, jumped up as if he had been shot; then, after a moment, he turned to Rafferty, at once amused and wrathful. "Great Scott! Tom, why didn't you tell me?" he demanded; his tones were low.

"Tell you?" Rafferty's eyebrows rose indignantly. "Haven't I been telling you? Tell you what?"

Barnett slapped his leg noiselessly. "Haven't you really guessed? Haven't you really? Sh-h-h! Listen!"

The cup had been picked up and replaced on the table, and the conversation had been resumed. The professor was speaking. "I understand that you have boats that ascend the river, señor?" he suggested.

Don Sabas nodded. "Si, señor," he answered; "I am a merchant of the rubber, and I have a boat that goes tomorrow to Curilla, forty leagues up the river. The señors desire to go no higher?"

"Oh, yes; we are going much higher, through the swamps, in fact. But we shall be very glad to engage passage to Curilla. Doubtless we can make arangements there for our further progress. We are taking a collapsible canoe of our own, and if we can get two or three oarsmen——"

Don Sabas spread out his hands. "The señor will pardon me," he interrupted; "it desolates me if I must lose the company of the señors, but of a truth it is not possible that the señors should get oarsmen at Curilla or elsewhere to take them through the swamps. The señor knows not what he asks. It is death to enter the upper jungle, and he will find no one to go with him. Even I, who bear a charmed life, protected against all foes, would not dare to attempt it."

Barnett glanced back at Rafferty quizzically. "You hear," he murmured, "he's always lugging in his 'charms.' Listen!"

If Don Sabas was indeed seeking an opportunity to tell of his horoscope, he found it, for the professor rose to the bait. "Eh? What's that? A charmed life? That sounds interesting, most interesting. Will you explain, señor?"

"Of a surety; in Paribo, years ago, the famous prophetess, Madame Delphi, have cast my horoscope. Many things she have told me, and all of them to now have come true. She have said nothing can slay me till the ground groans beneath me and the sky breeds fire-birds above me."

"You leave to-morrow, I think you said?" asked the professor.

"Si, señor." Don Sabas shrugged his shoulders. "Tomorrow at mid-day. If the señors will, they will. But will the señor tell the consul Americano that I have protest, and that they go of their own will? I wish not that I be blamed when the señors die of the fever."

"Certainly," the professor nodded; "and I'll say, señor, that your sentiments do you honor. Now as to terms?"

Terms were easily agreed on, and the three went out after arranging for the transfer of the Meekertons' baggage from the *Pathfinder* to the *Blanchita*, Don Sabas' boat.

When they had gone, Barnett lay back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. He did not speak, and Rafferty, after a glance at his face, kept silence likewise. After a while Barnett lighted a cigar and smoked meditatively to the end, also in silence; then abruptly he threw the butt away and sat up.

"Tom," he said, "I know you've been wondering what I've been after down in this part of the world. Well, I'm going to tell you. I came down to help a friend and I stayed to pay a debt. Did you ever hear of Champe Braxton?"

"Never. Hold on a minute; sure, that was the name of the man the boy knew that he said was a friend of yours."

"Exactly; I met him at Tahiti several years ago, and jolted up against him several times afterwards. He's a good deal older than I am, but he and I took to each other wonderfully. He saved my life once, and he's one of the truest, best and jolliest fellows in the world. He was collecting for museums and zoos up in the States, particularly for the Harlem Arboretum."

"Where the professor comes from?"

"Exactly; he wrote me a letter dated at this very place more than eighteen months ago, telling me that he was about to go up the Paribo to track down the White Death."

"Like the professor?"

"Partly; but I suspect the professor is going after Braxton as well as after the White Death. Braxton said the best time to go up the river would be in about four months, and wanted me to join him. I didn't get the letter till a year later, and then I got you and the yacht and came down here—see?"

"And he was gone?"

"Disappeared absolutely; nobody seemed to know a thing about him. It drove me wild. Here old Champe had called on me for help and I had failed him; but I determined to rescue him, or avenge him."

"Avenge him on who?"

"That's what I don't know. He went up after the White Death. But what is the White Death? Champe wrote me that it wasn't merely a fever or an insect or a snake or anything of that sort. Maybe it was one of those," he wrote, "but he was sure it was something more. He believed there was some devilish human intelligence back of the thing. I've spent six months with the dregs down here getting confirmation of his suspicions, but I haven't yet found out the secret of the White Death nor who's behind it; but I'm going to find it out. I've taken six months to prepare. There's a lot of bad country, mountains and swamps and all to cross, and I had to take every precaution. I expected to start up the river in a week, but now I'll go with the Meekertons. I guess they're after Champe Braxton; anyway, I'm not going to let a—er—boy like that go to his death without trying to save him."

"Good Lord! Say——"

"Don't say it, Tom; my mind's made up. I want you to help, of course; but also, of course, I'm not asking you to go in blindfolded. It's a deadly dangerous job and I won't blame you a bit if you prefer to stay out."

"Stay out!" Rafferty sniffed scornfully; he did not even trouble to get angry.

Barnett chuckled. "Oh, well, I had to give you the chance," he explained defensively. "I'd have been all broken up if you'd reneged. Now what I want you to do is to follow us up the river in the *Pathfinder* as high as you can go safely, and then—— But of course I can't give you any definite instructions yet. We'll talk that over later."

"All right."

"The first thing to do is for you to see the Meekertons and tell them that you've met an old acquaintance of yours ashore named Geoff—that's my own middle name, you know, with the last syllable cut off, and it's the name I've been using down here. Say that I'm a good sort of a fellow, but that whisky has been my bane and has made me a miserable beachcomber. Not that they're likely to bother much about me, even when they do know I'm going so long as they think I'm the drunken beachcomber I'm supposed to be. I've built up that sort of a reputation on purpose and I don't want it wrecked by being identified as Jack Barnett, yacht owner—see?"

"I see; but it's the devil's own reputation you're after giving yourself. Why not tell the professor the truth, if it's on the same errand he is?"

"Why not post the news on the wharf, and be done with it? I won't trust anybody, not even the—— But I forgot; you haven't guessed yet."

"Guessed what?"

"Maybe this'll tell." Barnett tore open the cablegram which Rafferty had brought and which had been lying sealed upon the table all the time. He scanned the lines abstractedly, then looked up.

"Poor Champe didn't take precautions," he said; "he didn't know what he was up against, and I do. I've laid my wires well. I was at Para when the Meekertons landed

there two weeks ago, and I heard about them and their errand. I cabled inquiries home, and this is the answer. Read it."

Rafferty took the blank and glanced at the lines traced across it; then he read:

"Four-eyed Jim skedaddled for Panatellaland gumshoeing for duck. Sent hurry-call for first-aid against White Reaper. Tried to work government, but failed. Nutty but nervy. Took along stenog peacherina as side-kicker. Some queen, believe me."

Rafferty dropped the paper. "So the boy's a girl," he said. "And how the devil did you guess?"

Geoffrey laughed. "You remember when the glass of paper straws tumbled over she tried to catch them between her knees because she flung them apart? Women always do that; they're used to having a skirt. Men always do just the opposite—see?"

"I see." Rafferty drew the blank near him and read it again. "Faith, and I'd have liked to see the greasers in the cable office trying to guess the meaning of this, so I would," he said. "I used to write East Side stuff for the *Joinal*, and I invented a lot of that gab myself. I can read it all right, but I can't understand it at all."

"Can't you? I can. It says that somebody—Champe, for a guess—managed to get a message to the professor, calling for help. The professor applied to the government, but got turned down. He would, of course. So he starts to the rescue himself, bringing with him a lady typist, who——"

"Who's the sweetheart of Champe Braxton."

"What—what's that?" Geoff sat up straight.

Rafferty stared. "Why, of course," he asserted. "What else? Sure it's plain as a pike, so it is. 'Side-kicker,' the message says. Whatever else can that mean, at all, at all?"

"But Champe is a lot older than this girl."

"And what difference does that make at all? She's going to rescue her sweetheart, so she is. Why else should she be coming on a trip like this? The pity of it. Here's me, a perfectly good bachelor, ready and waiting, and she——"

"Shut up! It's none of our business what she's going for. She's wearing trousers for protection, of course, and she's mighty wise to do it. Still, she'll be found out sooner or later. I'm not the only wise guy down here, and——"

"Does Don Sabas guess, do you fancy?"

Geoff shook his head. "I think not yet, and I hope he won't till we get outside his bailiwick. I don't trust any greaser. Now, Tom, you trot on board, and see about getting me hired as boatman, guide and retainer extraordinary."

CHAPTER THREE

RAFFERTY had no difficulty in getting Geoff the desired position with Professor Meekerton. The professor, indeed, was frankly delighted.

A spirit of mischief, never quite asleep in Rafferty, came to the surface. He remembered that Geoff had expressed a liking for baked beans; he remembered, too, Geoff's very evident admiration of the pretended boy, Francis, concerning the secret of whose sex both of them had of course decided to pretend ignorance.

"There's just one other thing to remember," he said consideringly, "and that's beans; it's a quare thing it is, but somehow Geoff's got beans associated with whisky. When he begins to talk about beans it's a cinch that it's wanting to go on a bat he is."

Francis stared at Rafferty unbelievingly, but the professor nodded. "Take a note of that, Francis, my boy," he directed. "It's a most peculiar case, belonging to the class known among medical men as a phobia, or perhaps I should say a philo. I shall have to consider to which class it should be assigned. When will this—er—Geoff join us?"

"He'll join you on the boat." Rafferty had decided how to keep Geoff's intention to join the expedition secret until it was too late to stop him. "He's got some things to attend to before he goes, and if it's willing to take him you are on my say-so without seeing him, he'll spend all his time in getting ready."

"Is he the man who went into the café with you yesterday?" It was Francis who asked the question.

Rafferty started. "Oh—ah—yes; we were there," he stammered. "But how did you——"

"We saw you from the botica," interrupted the boy, "so we'll recognize him." He turned to the professor. "Father, you'd better see Don Sabas and arrange for Geoff's passage."

The professor seemed to be hesitating, but Rafferty did not pause for that. He had no mind to risk the engagement further. "I'll send him word right away," he said.

The professor and Francis left the *Pathfinder* for the *Blanchita*. The *Blanchita* was neither large nor commodious. It goes without saying she was not clean.

Don Sabas met the Meekertons at the gangway and welcomed them on board. His eyes gleamed as they rested on Francis' slim form. "You have still the resolve to be gone, señor?" he questioned. "You will not turn back and give up this so foolhardy trip? Believe me, señor, it is death to which you go."

The professor shook his head. "Scientific men have to take risks, señor," he answered. "Where would the world be if we took no chances? Besides"—the professor brightened—"we have had a stock of good luck since we saw you yesterday. We have found a man who will go with us through the swamps on the upper river."

Don Sabas started and the smile on his face vanished, giving place to an expression of surprise. Frances—whose name we shall hereafter use in the feminine—started, too, and made a motion to interpose; then, plainly deciding that it was too late, desisted. Both her motion and that of Don Sabas' were so brief that they might easily have passed unnoticed.

The professor looked up. "You go with us, señor?"

"Of a surety; I have the business at Curilla. Adios, I will see you again later." Don Sabas nodded to the professor, smiled at Frances, and turned away.

The *Blanchita* was beginning to move. Her engines were groaning and wheezing and her paddle-wheels were churning the water; after a moment she gathered way and began to forge slowly against the current, puffing and blowing like the lumbering river pig she was.

The professor talked on, now and then calling on Frances to make a note of something that he saw in the water or on the banks.

For a long time, perhaps an hour, the girl obeyed in silence; then abruptly she closed her book. "I'm going to look for Geoff," she announced.

"Geoff? Oh, yes; do so, if you think best. But—er—be careful. He may wish to conceal his presence on board."

Frances made no answer; abruptly she turned away and began to wander over the boat, searching, and at last she found him.

Geoff was lying on the deck in the shade of the deckhouse, with his head propped in a bundle. His face was slightly flushed and he was breathing heavily. He seemed to be either asleep or unconscious.

For a while Frances stood and stared down at his prostrate form; then, with lips severely set, she started back to the spot where she had left the professor. A few yards away, out of sight of Geoff, she met Don Sabas.

The Spanish-American paused. "You see, señorita?" he said, gesturing toward Geoff's sprawling form.

Frances nodded. "I see," she answered heavily. "Is he drunk?"

"Yes." Don Sabas shrugged his shoulders. "I think you will not see him long," he said. "Probably he will desert at Quita."

"Quita?"

"It is there that we stop for the night. Beyond Quita the Paribo may not be navigated in the dark. This Geoff

may try to step ashore there, but I will see that he does not."

But the girl shook her head. "Never mind," she said. "If he wants to go, let him go. Better he should desert now than later. Adios, señor." With downcast mien she started aft.

Don Sabas looked after her gloatingly. If Frances had seen the expression on his face she might have been frightened.

The *Blanchita* puffed slowly up-stream. The sun went down at last, and the night, which had been waiting under the rim of the horizon, swooped down upon the river. Twilight in the tropics lasts only while the sun is vanishing; once its rim drops out of sight blackness is absolute.

Shortly after darkness fell a sudden change in the motion of the boat told Geoff that it was about to tie up at the landing at Quita. It reminded him, too, that he was hungry. He opened his eyes, yawned, and stretched himself for the benefit of his fellow passengers, and was about to sit up when he caught sight of Frances coming toward him across the dimly lighted deck.

Just above him the girl stopped. "Geoff," she said.

Geoff's inclination was to jump to his feet. Then he remembered that he must be careful not to betray his knowledge of the other's sex. "Howdy," he said, rising lazily. "You're young Mr. Meekerton, ain't you?"

Frances nodded. "Yes," she said slowly.

"I guess I've been asleep all afternoon."

"I know it." The girl's tones were significant.

Geoff winced; it was not pleasant for him to be despised by people of his own walk in life. "I knew you wouldn't want me," he went on, "and so I just stayed where I was. Anything I can do?"

"No, thank you." Frances hesitated, then: "Father and I brought a lunch with us," she said. "Father thought you might like to join us."

"I'll be delighted. You're very kind. I'll just get my bag." Geoff stepped across the deck and picked up the bundle on which his head had rested. "I'll put this with your things, if you don't mind."

Frances then left him and joined the professor, who was preparing a lunch. She acquainted the professor with the fact that Geoff was going to dine with them. Soon the meal was ready and Frances returned to where she had left Geoff.

In the meantime Geoff stood watching as the *Blanchita* was swung alongside a sort of pier and was made fast with much unnecessary expenditure of energy and breath. A gangway was pushed over the side and the passengers began to trail down it to seek food and distraction in the town.

CHAPTER FOUR

FOR a moment after Frances left him, Geoff stood by the rail staring after her with wonder in his eyes. Later, while he was watching the passengers walking down the gangplank, some one tapped him on the shoulder.

"Buenos tardes, señor," said a voice in his ear.

Geoff turned. "Buenos tardes, Don Sabas," he answered.

"Will you not give me the felicity of accompanying me to the café of the Tres Hermanos and dining with me?"

Geoff hesitated for a moment, but only for a moment. "The Tres Hermanos?" he echoed in a tone of pleasure. "I suppose you mean it, señor. I was waiting for young Mr. Meekerton, who had asked me to join him and his father at lunch. But I will join you instead."

The two walked rapidly across the ill-lit landing and passed into the criss-crossed streets of the town, vanishing an instant before Frances reached the gangplank on her quest.

The Three Sisters Café was large and well lighted and was comfortably thronged. As Geoff and Don Sabas entered, however, a party seated at a secluded table in the rear departed, and Don Sabas at once took possession of their table.

Geoff looked over the bill-of-fare and selected two or three high-priced dishes. He tried to give the impression that he was grateful for Don Sabas' favor and was determined to make the most of a rare opportunity to dine well.

"And to drink, señor?" Don Sabas queried politely.

Geoff hesitated; he really hated liquor, though he had been forced to pretend otherwise, since he had been masquerading as a beachcomber. "Not for me," he said finally. "I'm going to cut out the flowing cup."

The don bowed; he leaned across the table and his voice became earnest. "I have, as may be known to you, a depot here for my business. I need some one who will be honest to conduct it. The Americanos are all honest, and when I see you in the boat to-day I say to myself that you are the very man for whom I look. I have heard much of you, señor, and, while I know that you drink hard, I know that you have the honesty. And after to-night you drink no more, is it not so? Therefore I offer you the place at two hundred pesos the month. Is it agreed, señor?"

Geoff shook his head hesitatingly. "I'd like to go you, don," he said. "I'd like to mighty well, and I will, if you'll hold the place open for me a month or so. I've got a job on hand now that I can't quit."

"Bueno," Don Sabas nodded philosophically; "we will say no more about it." The Spanish-American raised his glass. "Your health, señor," he said.

Geoff picked up his glass. "Salute," he said; he touched it to his lips and set it down unemptied.

After a while Geoff understood that he was dismissed, and he was very willing.

The hour was late and the town seemed to have gone to bed. There were few street-lamps, and as nearly all the shops and cafés were closed the streets were very dim. Streaks of light leaking through and around drawn blinds, from behind which came the subdued chatter of voices, told that some of the natives were awake but did not help to illuminate the road. Two native girls, powdered and otherwise decorated, loafing on one corner, started to speak to Geoff as he passed, only to turn away with contemptuous tossings of the head as they saw his clothing.

Geoff had almost reached the landing when he saw a knot of men coming toward him. They were laughing and talking and seemed not to have noticed him. As they came nearer he saw that they were six in number and that one of them stood head and shoulders above the rest. They were marching abreast, filling the street, which indeed was scarcely wider than a lane. No one else was visible.

Geoff wanted no trouble, so he drew well to the side, so that the party might easily pass. Instead of availing themselves of the vacated space, however, they lurched toward him. Before he could evade them, the big man had stumbled against him, and the whole line swung about, as if on a pivot, enveloping him.

Geoff had lived too long in Spanish-American towns not to know his danger. Instantly he caught the big man and flung him back into the mid-street and tried to dart through the gap. Before he could do so, however, the whole party was upon him, raging and shaking their fists and jabbering in Spanish and in Indian gutturals. More than one knife gleamed in the starlight.

There was no time to lose; as the band closed in, Geoff struck at the foremost, landing on his chest with a punch that hurled him bodily through the ranks of his comrades. But before the American could recover, two others were upon him, clutching at his arms with wide fingers. One he met with an uppercut beneath the chin, which drove him reeling sideways; the other he struck on the side of his head. The blow glanced, however, and its lost impetus swung him half around. Before he could recover, some one was upon his back, clutching at his throat. As he tried to turn his foot slipped and he crashed heavily backward against the wall of a house. The man behind him got the full force of the fall, gasped, and let go; but as Geoff wriggled loose and sprang to his feet, the big man, whom he had knocked down at the first clash, sprang at him with a roar of rage and locked him in a grip such as he had never felt before. The onset drove him away from the wall into mid-street.

Some one opened a window close at hand, letting out a gleam of light, by which Geoff saw that his last assailant was a negro, as tall and even broader than himself. He caught a glimpse of the thick, brutish face as it pressed against his shoulder; then he concentrated all his strength in an effort to break away. His left arm had been caught in the black's grip and was pinioned to his side, and, try as he might, he could not free it; his right fist fell ineffectively on the bony, wool-covered skull. Some one's hands closed on his windpipe from behind. At the touch he managed to writhe around, tearing loose from the strangling fingers but still unable to break from the negro's grip. Instinctively, however, his fingers fastened on the man's windpipe and closed in a grip of despair. Sparks were dancing in his own eyes, blurring his vision; but he pressed his fingers and thumb tighter and tighter till they met behind the Adam's-apple of his foe.

Then abruptly the gorilla's arms relaxed, the negro fell away, and the blessed air rushed into Geoff's lungs. He sensed another foe behind him and tried to turn; but as he did so, a crashing blow descended on his head, then darkness.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONSCIOUSNESS came back to Geoff slowly. He was lying alone on the mud floor of a hovel, through cracks and crannies in whose walls the sun was glittering into his eyes. He propped himself against the side of the hut and tried to recollect how he had come there. Gradually the situation cleared. He remembered the meeting with the men on the street, the fight, and the sudden turning of victory into defeat. In spite of his splitting temples he felt a glow of pride when he recalled the fight he had made against odds.

Geoff opened his eyes and saw above him Frances' face.

"I wonder whether they left me any money," he muttered at last, struck by sudden misgivings; "I reckon not."

He felt in his pocket, and with some surprise discovered a single peso. "Humph," he exclaimed, "it's good of them to leave me one. I think I had five. I'll go and wash up and get something to eat, and then—well, then we'll see."

With some difficulty he got to his feet. The motion made his head spin, and he leaned against the wall till the universe settled back into place about him; then he walked to the door and found himself facing a narrow lane, much like the one where he had fought the great fight. Indeed, after a little study, he decided that it was the same lane and that he was within a few score feet of the place of his debacle. He could see the sluggish waters of the river rolling in the sunlight at its foot.

The lane was nearly deserted, and no one seemed to notice him as he made his way to a near-by cottage and asked for a pan of water. A kindly native woman washed the dried blood out of his hair and put some sort of ointment on the bruise and the jagged cut that accompanied it.

Then Geoff went down to the water's edge. The *Blanchita* was gone; he had been longer than he had any idea of. He was looking, not for the *Blanchita*, but for the *Pathfinder*, which he figured ought to be nearly to Quita. Not seeing her, he went into a chop suey restaurant, where his tattered clothing was no bar to his admittance. There he spent the better part of an hour and the whole of his one peso for a dinner that, whatever its origin, put new strength into him; then he went back to the landing, arriving just in time to see the *Pathfinder* approaching.

Suspecting that he might be under observation, he joined the idlers at the water-side and waited till he saw Rafferty come down the gangplank; then he approached, hat in hand, and asked for a job.

Rafferty caught on instantly, took him to the side, and called the boatswain. "Take this man to the captain," he ordered, "and say I hope he can be given work." Then, as Geoff went meekly on board, Rafferty resumed his trip to the post-office.

When he came back Geoff, bathed, medicined, clothed in clean though very simple garments and more or less in his right mind, was awaiting him. "Come in, Tom," he called. "I've got a lot to tell you and mighty little time to do it." Then, as Rafferty came into the cabin, Geoff turned. "Go ahead, captain," he ordered; "get everything ready and let me know when you reach the first clear stretch of water. Sit down, Rafferty, and listen."

Rafferty sat down. As he did so the screw of the *Pathfinder* began to beat the water, and the yacht trembled and slid forward.

With glistening eyes Rafferty listened to the tale of his employer's adventures. "Six to one!" he cried. "The bloody devils! Say, Tom," he coaxed, "let's go back and let me take a boat's crew and clean out the town. We can surely do it, don't you think so?"

Geoff laughed. "You couldn't find the men who did it," he demurred.

"And what difference does that make? Sure we'd find somebody, and the ones we got would be the ones we were after."

Geoff laughed. "I'm afraid we haven't time, Tom," he said, "and I guess I squared the account pretty fairly, anyhow. If they're satisfied, I am; it's those other devils I'm gunning for. I want to rejoin the Meekertons p. d. q."

"Oh," Rafferty grinned, "sure; and I hope Miss Frances is enjoying the best of health," he remarked.

"She is; say, Tom, she's the dearest girl. Most girls would have fought shy of a fellow with a reputation like the one you gave me, confound you, and particularly after they'd seen me lying drunk in the sun; but she—well, she's all right, she is."

Rafferty started to laugh; then he thought better of it. "Don't be after forgetting the side-kicker, Jack," he suggested soberly.

"Side-kicker nothing. Braxton is her father, if he's anything to her. He's too old to be anything else."

"And is it two fathers she's got?"

"Meekerton isn't her father; you can tell that from the

cablegram, and I'm betting that Braxton is. Anyway, I'm going to fight for her. Now, Rafferty, get ready!"

"Ready for what?"

"Ready to take me up the river in the hydroplane. I've got to be at Curilla before the *Blanchita* gets in to-night, and you've got to take me. It's a hundred miles, and we've got but an hour of daylight. If you want to get back by daylight you've got to start as soon as Captain Ross finds a good place for it."

"It's ready now I am."

"Good; the boat is stopping. Captain Ross must be ready; come along, and I'll give you a lot of instructions on the way."

Two hours later the *Blanchita* lay moored against the landing at Curilla, the terminus of the up-river voyage. The excitement of her arrival had died down and the crowd of natives who had swarmed on board her to greet returning friends, receive packages and demand news from down the river had filtered back to the shore, taking most of the passengers and members of the crew with them.

Don Sabas was one of the last to leave; as he reached the side he caught sight of the professor and Frances, who stood forlornly by the rail, staring at the small, dark village that lay almost invisible beneath the dim stars. He stopped abruptly, and then went up to them.

"Ah, señors," he exclaimed, "you must afford me the pardon; of a truth I have made the error to forget that you have not the home. Will you not give me the pleasure to accept the hospitality of my poor roof?"

The professor hesitated, but Frances answered: "You are very kind, señor, but we think we would better stay on board for the night; to-morrow we will see; our baggage is all here, you know."

"Bueno, as the señors wish. The señors are very welcome to stay on board till the *Blanchita* starts back the day after to-morrow. Perhaps"—the man's teeth flashed into a smile—"perhaps the señors will decide to go back on her?"

"Go back!" The professor seemed a little bewildered. "Oh, no; to-morrow we start up the river, you know, if we can get boatmen."

"If"—Don Sabas shook his head—"the señors will not believe me when I say they will find no boatmen who will go into the swamps it is well that they satisfy themselves. When they do, then let the señor remember that it is no disgrace to turn back from a venture which no one, not even those accustomed to the country, dares to undertake. Buenos noches, señor."

"Señor"—Frances stopped Don Sabas as he turned away—"the boatman we had engaged, the one that was left behind at Quita, when can he get to us?"

"What do you say, señor?" Don Sabas' astonishment seemed real.

"When will another boat reach here, I mean?"

"Another boat? Not for a week, señor. But truly the señor does not expect to see this Geoff again? I assure the señor that he will not do so; the man is of the most low and has deserted. The señors will never see him again."

But Frances shook her head. "I don't believe Geoff meant to desert," she declared. "He wouldn't have left his bag with us if he had."

Don Sabas stared; Frances' tones had been tremulous and some note in them seemed to strike the Spanish-American with surprise. He glanced at her and then swiftly looked away; but his eyes kept coming back to her.

"His bag? Ah, yes, bueno; we will see. If Señor Geoff turns up, no one will be the more happy than I." He bowed, but once more his eyes scanned the girl furtively.

As he straightened up, his eyes, passing over Frances' shoulder, suddenly bulged, and his figure became rigid. The next instant his lips began to move.

"Santa Maria!" he gasped in awe-stricken tones. "Santa Maria!"

Startled, the professor and Frances spun around, their glances following the direction of Don Sabas' eyes; then they, too, stared in amazement.

Ascending the hatchway of the steamer, just behind them came Geoff's tall figure. At the top of the steps he halted and yawned expansively; then he glanced about the deck, saw the three at the rail, and came toward them. "I guess I've been asleep," he remarked in confidential tones as he came up.

Nobody answered; Don Sabas was crossing himself and muttering something in Spanish, either oaths or prayers, and the professor and Frances were staring in fascinated silence.

Geoff looked a little embarrassed. "I hope I'm not late for that supper you offered me, Mr. Francis," he said hesitatingly.

"Where did you come from?" cried Don Sabas, thrusting himself forward. "How—what—dios! dios!"

Geoff looked at him in mild surprise. "From the hold, I reckon," he answered doubtfully, glancing at the hatchway from which he had just emerged; then he looked about him. "Hello," he exclaimed, "this doesn't look like Quita."

Frances stepped forward. "We're at Curilla, Geoff," she said. "You've been asleep for twenty-four hours. We thought you had been left at Quita. I'm glad we were wrong." She put out her hand, and Geoff clasped it enthusiastically.

CHAPTER SIX

CURILLA by daylight proved to be a delightful surprise. The *Blanchita* had gained only about one hundred and fifty miles of southing, but she had gone far beyond the pestiferous coast into a rolling plateau country, edged on the south by a blue ridge of mountains cut by a deep notch. The tiny whitewashed town was dirty, but the dirt was hidden beneath the green. Frances was standing by the rail of the *Blanchita*, staring down at the long, light canoe laden with luggage that trailed at the end of the rope. She looked up as Geoff, who had been up in the town seeking rowers, mounted the gangplank, and came toward her. She did not speak, but her eyes held a question.

Geoff read and answered it. "Nothing doing," he said. "I've combed the town and I haven't found a single oarsman who will go through the swamps. There are plenty who will go to their edge at the ridge yonder"—he pointed toward the blue line of the southern hills—"but beyond that, no. Don Sabas was right."

The girl bit her lip. "Yet we will go," she declared obstinately.

"Oh, sure"—Geoff's words were light, but his tones were determined—"we'll find paddlers sooner or later, and even if we don't—but that can go till later. You can't blame the men. It's a bad country—mal pais, you know—and——"

A sudden cry, not loud but excited, came from the bow of the boat. Geoff, turning to look, saw that a man was standing at the forward rail pointing, and that other men were hurrying toward him. All were chattering excitedly.

Frances looked, too. "What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know. Suppose we go and see?"

The throng at the bow was still pointing at something in the water. As Geoff and Frances reached the rail, a canoe shot out from the bank toward the object. An instant more and the bow oarsman bent over, then faced toward the shore and shouted something.

"What is it?" Frances asked again, in a quivering voice.

Geoff drew his breath hissingly. "It's a victim of the White Death," he said; "the body of some poor devil who has died by it. It's nothing new; five or six come down every year."

The men in the boat had contrived to slip a rope about the body and were towing it toward the landing. Frances watched them come, then, ignoring Geoff, she turned toward the gangplank.

Geoff caught her by the shoulder. "Don't go," he protested; "don't look at it. You'll never forget it if you do. I've seen one such body, and——"

"I must see it." The girl's face was colorless, but her lips were set. "It may be some one that I know."

"Oh, well, if you must, you must; but let me look first, and perhaps—— If it's a native it couldn't be your friend, could it?"

"No."

"All right, then; I'll look and let you know. Later will be time enough for you to blast your young brain. The chances are a hundred to one that it won't be your friend. A body is picked up once every two or three months, I tell you, and heaven knows how many more are carried out to sea without being noticed. Wait here, or call your father; he will want to see."

Obediently Frances turned back to the cabin, while Geoff went down the gangplank and joined the throng that was standing at the upper end of the landing, staring down at somethig wrapped and rewrapped in a coiling nest of silky fibers—a sort of mildew, through which the horrible sunken features of a man could be dimly traced. The snaky filaments were as thick as horsehair and were viscous, clinging to the body in most places, but with free ends that wavered in the current like seaweed wavering above a submerged rock. In places they were very numerous and absolutely hid the body, but over the face they were sparse enough to let Geoff see that it was that of an Indian.

Satisfied of this, he turned to look for Frances and caught sight of the professor hurrying down the gangplank, and Frances watching from the top in obvious agony. Geoff took two or three steps toward the plank, then put his hand to his mouth.

"It's an Indian," he called.

Frances' tense frame relaxed; she nodded gratefully, then turned and stumbled away to the cabin. Geoff had no opportunity to watch her further, for the professor had come up.

"Where is he?" he asked excitedly. "Dear me, this is fortunate. Where is the poor fellow?"

Geoff made no comment on the professor's choice of language; he recognized it as the selection of the scientific mind, and knew that the professor was speaking as an investigator and not as a man.

"Over here in the water, professor," he answered, gesturing.

The professor pushed through the crowd and squatted down on the landing and peered at the body. Singular, very singular," he muttered; then he whipped on a pair of rubber gloves and lifted one of the trailing filaments from the water. It seemed to be only loosely attached, for it readily came loose.

The professor spoke without looking up. "They seem to be wrapped entirely about the body," he said; "here, Geoff, help me to roll the cadaver over. I want to see how long these fibers are. Hold on, don't touch them with your fingers; the stuff may be poisonous. Get a stick, and——"

His voice was drowned in a growl that rose from the crowd. Amazedly he scanned the circle, then half arose. All about him was a circle of scowling, threatening faces. "Good gracious, what is the matter?" he faltered, rising to his feet. The filament that he was clutching broke off, leaving a fragment a foot long in his hand.

Fortunately, Geoff understood. "Just a minute, professor," he said; then he spoke to the crowd in liquid Spanish, and as he spoke scowls abated, though they did not disappear. Finally he explained. "They object to your handling the body, professor," he said; "they think it is sacrilege. If you want to study this poor devil you'll have to see the priest. Here he comes now. He and Don Sabas are just joining the crowd. I thought it was about time for them both to show up. I'll go chin them."

The others, watching, saw Geoff accost a man in the robe of a priest and argue with him long. Don Sabas, after glancing hurriedly at the body, joined the discussion, apparently seconding Geoff's efforts; but the priest very clearly withstood them both, and at last Geoff came dejectedly back. "Nothing doing," he reported; "he won't hear anything of the sort. He says it will be sacrilege. The man is to be buried at once."

The professor threw up his hands. "But I simply must study the body," he declared despairingly; "I simply must study it and trace these filaments to their point of origin. Without that I cannot determine their nature. The chance must not be let slip. I will appeal to the president of the country."

"I'm sorry, but you can't; there's no wire from here and no way of communicating. Besides, no president would interfere with the church in a matter like this. Did the filament tell you nothing?"

"It tells too much, and too little; it tells enough to rouse to the highest pitch my desire to know more." The professor spoke, as always, in measured periods; but he could not keep the excitement out of his voice. "The filament is not of a fungoid or indeed of a vegetable character," he went on; "it is of distinctly animal origin. You spoke of it as being silky, I believe. It is more than silky; it is real silk, though not of silkworm silk. I do not know what sort of silk it is, and I must know; I must know."

"Silk? Great Scott! How could——"

"That is what I must learn. It is a hollow tube—a water-tight tube. No doubt it is these tubes that act as air chambers and float the body; undoubtedly it was produced by an insect of some sort, perhaps a very small insect that may burrow in myriads beneath the skin of the victim, and—— Oh, good God!" The professor gave way to very unscientific excitement. "I've got to investigate; I've got to."

But Geoff shook his head. "It's no go," he said. "I did my best, and Don Sabas helped; but it's no go. The thing would be sacrilege, says the priest, and he sticks to it. There, they're carrying the body away now."

The body had indeed been lifted, apparently with extreme caution, from the water and wrapped in a roll of sacking, and was being taken away under the direction of the church.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LONG before dawn the next morning the adventurers were astir, making ready for the beginning of their perilous enterprise. The first streaks of daylight, penetrating the mists that curled upward from the broad surface of the river, saw the canoe push off from the landing and start up-stream, driven by strong arms and deft paddles. Close behind followed another boat filled with natives "To help us over the first stages," Don Sabas explained.

For half a day the river showed no change from its character in the middle reaches. Not till the blue hills had come so close that they seemed to tower above the voyagers did a change come.

Then abruptly the Paribo widened out into a veritable lake, sluggish and overgrown with water weeds on either side, down whose middle a strip of clear water showed the position of the channel. Half a mile beyond the shores—constricted, evidently drawing into the mouth of the pass—and the water quickened their pace. Just beyond a stretch, where the water ran furiously through a narrow rocky gut and the canoe had to be carried bodily, the stream broadened sharply and the men set their burden down with a grunt of relief and stood waiting, while the rest of the party gathered around.

Don Sabas looked about him. "It is finish," he said. "From here on we depend upon ourselves. Will the señors see if everything is here and in place?"

While the three Americans pawed over the equipment and made sure that nothing had been forgotten Don Sabas' men pitched camp, building fires and preparing more or less comfortable couches beneath the overturned canoe. It was growing dark in the depths of the canyon, and haste was necessary.

Geoff looked about him for a moment, seeking some-

thing to do, only to find that there was not enough work for even the peons. For a moment he hesitated, then he went up to Frances.

"How would you like to climb up a way and see what we can see, Mr. Francis?" he asked. "The rocks seem to be fairly clear and not too steep, and it'll be daylight up there for an hour yet."

The girl hesitated, then she seemed to come to some determination. "Very well," she said; "I'll go." She got up from the rock on which she had been sitting. "Which way?" she asked.

Geoff gazed at the ascent consideringly. "Over here, I guess," he answered, and led the way forthwith.

Twenty minutes steady climbing took the two to the rim of the gorge, where convenient ledges afforded comfortable seats, from which they could scan the country to the south; before them, beyond the short slope of the mountain, lay a vast expanse of green, bounded on the far side by a faint, almost invisible line of blue. The green was so continuous that it might have passed for mingling grass and brush; but both Geoff and Frances knew that it was composed of the tops of huge trees.

For a time the two gazed in silence on this great barrier thrown across their path, then Geoff turned to the girl impulsively. "May I say something?" he asked simply.

Frances started, reading some curious meaning in his tones. "Certainly," she answered coldly.

Geoff stared at her, then at the far-off horizon. "I hope you won't think me presumptuous," he said; "but I must speak. I brought you up here to try to make you understand what you are up against. That swamp is more than fifty miles wide and it will take us at least a week to cross it—a week of toil and sweat and torture, perhaps of fever and death—and beyond it lies the domain of the White Death. I want you to look at it and then I want to ask you to go back with the men to-morrow morning—go back to God's country, if possible—but back to the coast, anyhow."

Frances gasped; then she spun on Geoff with open mouth. "Go back?" she cried. "Are you crazy?"

"No, I'm not crazy; I am not proposing that the professor should turn back or that I should. I know it wouldn't do any good to try to turn the professor back. It couldn't be done, and I'm not planning to back out myself. I'm going through; I'm going to find out about this White Death, or stay with it. But there is no need for you to go. You are too young to take the chances. Chances! There aren't any chances, really. I'm used to the tropics, and the professor is lean and stringy and may escape the fever; but you, don't go. It's sure death!"

"And if it is? What if I said that I should go on if the difficulties and dangers were ten times as great as they are? What if I said I should go on if I knew that certain death awaited me? What if I said I had to go on no matter what befell?"

Geoff's eyes grew pitiful. "I should say—I should say—I should beg you to let me take the message for you," he answered slowly.

"The message? What message? What do you mean?" the girl began to pant in sudden terror.

"Anybody can see that you have some personal reason for wanting to go. The professor goes for science, that's credible enough. You might go for the adventure, but you don't. Therefore, I'll take your message gladly and I'll bring the answer back, if I live. Let me do it."

"No!" Frances threw back her head; a sudden rage possessed her. "How dare you speak this way to me," she demanded, "you—you—my father's servant?"

Geoff started; a brick-red flush swept his face from forehead to chin, then he laughed shortly. "You are right, of course, from your point of view," he said; "but there is another point of view. May I tell you something about myself?"

"No!" Frances' anger was still high. "No; I know quite enough about you." She rose. "Come," she said, "I am going back."

"Just a moment, please; we are to travel together for days and perhaps for weeks. There is no use in starting out with ill feeling between us. I didn't mean to offend you, and I do want to set myself straight. Rafferty told you that I was a sot."

Frances flashed around. "Is it necessary for me to hear this?" she demanded.

"Yes, it is necessary. Rafferty told you that I wanted to get away from the coast, so as to be out of reach of whisky. Well, he told you that because I asked him to do so. I don't like whisky; I hate the stuff. I——"

"What?"

"Yes, I hate it. But I've had to play a part. And I've played it for six months. Like you and your father, I wanted to solve the mystery of the White Death."

"You?"

"Yes—I—a friend of mine tried to solve it. He believed and I believe that there is some devilish human personality behind the mystery. My friend died by the White Death. I saw his body, and I swore to avenge him; but I made haste slowly. For six months I have been gathering the threads; I was nearly ready to put them to the proof when you and your father came along. I decided to join you, so I asked Rafferty to get you to employ me as a boatman. Of course, I had to live up to my character; if I am right in thinking that a human mind is working to bar our passage it will be well for that mind to consider me beneath contempt—you understand?"

"Yes, I understand." The girl's cheeks were flushed, but her tones were noncommittal.

"I meant not to tell you this till we were well into the swamp, but conditions have changed, and——"

"How have they changed?"

"Well"—Geoff hesitated—"well, to tell you the honest truth, they changed when Don Sabas joined your father. I don't trust him. I didn't tell you all that happened at Quita that night, or the part he played in it. I'm beginning to think he knows altogether too much about the White Death, and——"

"For shame?" Geoff had gone blindly on, not noticing the storm signals that had been flashing in the girl's eyes; when the tempest broke it bewildered him.

"Yes, for shame. How dare you so slander an honest gentleman? Oh, how can men sink so low? You—you were a gentleman once; even yet some signs of your lost life cling about you. You had mother; perhaps sisters, friends, all that makes life happy, and you have flung them away. And for what? To become a drunken sot?"

"Good God"—Geoff found his tongue—"that was only a pose, I tell you."

"Stop! Don't repeat that falsehood; don't let me lose the last bit of respect I have for you."

"Falsehood?"

"Yes, falsehood—brazen falsehood. Have I not seen you in drunken sleep? Did I not see you slip on board the *Blanchita* through an open port at Curilla a few minutes before you came on deck and said you had been sleeping in the hold all day? Did you not sneak away from Paribo to avoid the women you had betrayed? Do you not bear on your head the signs of a drunken brawl?"

"That'll do." Geoff's lips had grown very white. "I didn't know you felt that way about me. I won't intrude my ideas on you any more; later, when we see Rafferty——"

"Rafferty? Yes, when we see him. You do well to call on a man who is out of reach. You—oh, you are all bad." The girl turned to the gorge. "I am going down," she said.

Geoff took a step to follow; then he stopped and looked about him once more.

The sun was very near the edge of the horizon, and the world was growing dim. The depth of the gorge was dark, save where the light of the camp glowed redly up. Faraway to the north something that looked like a huge bird was hastening through the sky.

Geoff nodded. "Yes," he said slowly, "Rafferty is out of reach. He—you are right. Let us go down."

CHAPTER EIGHT

FOR six days the adventurers pushed their way southward, finding no break in the monotony of the swamp. At intervals Geoff climbed trees and endeavored to catch a glimpse either of the mountains toward which they were advancing, or of the hydroplane in which he had instructed Rafferty to follow. He never succeeded in sighting either, however; he could not get high enough to see the mountains, and of course the chance of seeing Rafferty was only a chance—and a slim one. Each time Geoff had to descend disappointedly to the Paribo, which, often narrowing to about ten feet, held that width practically unchanged. After the fifth day, however, its channel seemed to straighten and its current to increase. It was Frances who first spoke of this. Late in the fifth day a sort of swell, only a few inches high but wave-like in character, came down the river and foamed against the sharp bow of the canoe and against the dipping paddles. Frances turned in her seat and watched it ripple away.

A few minutes after four another swell raced past the canoe, and Frances cried out: "There! There it is again, bigger than before. What's causing it? What does it mean?"

"There's one thing it probably means," Geoff said, "and that is that we're getting near the edge of the swamp. Those waves started outside somewhere; they couldn't have started inside. There isn't room inside for them to start, and if they did start outside the edge can't be very far away, for they'd lose force tremendously in coming down a channel like this."

On the next day, however, the height of waves doubled and redoubled until it required careful management to save the canoe from being swamped, or at the least from being swept backward and flung against the great trees that stood at the edge of the channel. Fortunately, the pulsations, besides being very regular, succeeding each other at intervals of almost exactly one hour, began to herald their approach with a constantly deepening roar, beginning abruptly and dying away down-stream. After a time it became evident that the roar began with a crash, distant and muffled, but still plainly different in character from the noise of its late progress. Warned by the roar as well as by their watches, the voyagers could not be taken by surprise.

On the seventh day the waves grew terribly dangerous, so much so that when the time for one drew near Don Sabas, in the bow, began to watch for a protected recess in the line of trees and to take refuge in it till the wave had passed.

Then ahead sounded the familiar rush that heralded the wave again. It died away, and for a few seconds silence reigned—a silence out of which swelled a murmur rising swiftly to a roar. Nearer it came and nearer; the winds began to shriek before it as if were a veritable tornado—nearer and nearer, until at last, along the stretch of the river a moving wall of water swept in view—high-backed, arching upward, toppling forward as it came. The dark surface of the river boiled and writhed beneath the shock, flinging tumbling minarets piled up foam-high against the overhanging trees. Closer and closer, around the lip of the recess it raged, tearing forestward; the canoe, gallantly impelled, rose to meet the shock, fighting against the flood that poured against its bow. For a moment the balance hung even; then the canoe rose, quivering on the broad back of the flood.

Don Sabas dropped his paddle and snatched up a scoop. "Bail!" he yelled.

In ten minutes the canoe was free of water, and in two minutes more it was hurrying up the stream. Then the canoe shot out of the channel into a basin, rock-bottomed, rock-encircled—a basin, small but deep, in which peaceful waters, stirred by the breeze, rippled gently in the sun. So fair, so peaceful, so lovely did it seem after the gloom of the jungle that Frances cried out in delight, heedless of the murmur that was swelling in the air and stayed the motion of her paddle.

Don Sabas saw her pause. "Row! Row!" he shrieked. "Valgame dios! Row! With mighty strokes he turned the boat aside, away from the yawning mouth of the gorge, and sent it flying across the pool.

Too late! Out of the gorge sprang a streak of living silver, a torrent of crystal water, edged with death, that towered above the canoe as it hurled itself forward upon the waters of the basin. Swift almost as a rifle-bullet it came, crashing downward, a flashing avalanche of ruin.

Beneath it canoe and passengers vanished, swallowed up in the rush of the foaming waters.

CHAPTER NINE

GEOFF, at the stern, was separated from Frances by both the professor and Pedro, but as the wave came down he leaped forward overboard into the still shallow water. His feet struck the rocky bottom and he turned, throwing up his arms just in time to catch Frances as the wave hurled her toward him; then what seemed like a thousand tons of water fell upon him, crushing him and his burden.

Chaos followed; Geoff could not see nor breathe nor think. He could only fight for life by blind instinct, as any live creature would fight, and cling to Frances by blind instinct—an instinct that told him that his arm was around a woman, and must not be loosed so long as life remained.

How long he struggled he never knew; it seemed hours, but it could have been only seconds. Helplessly he was whirled and tossed and pounded; then, as if in derision, he and his burden were spewed upward and flung against the sandy edge of the basin and dropped. Despite the shock, which drove every particle of breath from his body, instinct made him clutch at the earth and hold on, while the retreating water, finding vent down the channel through the jungle, tore at his legs and tried to wrest Frances from his grasp. For an instant the struggle lasted, silent and deadly; then the water drained away, leaving him free.

With an effort he sat up and glanced about him as the piled-up waters of the basin raged outward through the vent. For the moment all his senses were concentrated in that vision. Close at hand he saw other forms—those of his companions—crumpled in the sands, along with the heavier litter from the canoe, which had been hurled up by the water. He saw one of them—the lowest down of all—suddenly switched away by the current and carried, feebly struggling, far out into the basin. He sensed that it was Pedro, and he let Frances slip from his arms and tried to rise and go to the rescue, only to fall back in deadly faintness.

The water, too much to escape at once by the vent, swirled around in a vast eddy, bearing the luckless Pedro; then at last it swept him down into the throat of the vent. A long liana pendant from a huge tree trailed, whipping in the current close beside him, and with the strength of despair the man clutched it and clung on, spinning in the water like a top at the end of a string.

Somehow Geoff scrambled to his feet. Once more the deadly weakness rushed in upon him, but this time he fought it back and took a step forward. With the motion sharp agony shot through his limbs, but with it came the escape from the lethargy that had held him. His brain cleared and he rushed to the water's edge.

Then he stopped. What was he to do? He, no more than Pedro, could fight against the swirling current. It was falling fast, but not fast enough to save the man. Long before it had sunk to moderation it would tear Pedro from his hold. Desperately he looked about him, seeking inspiration, and his eyes fell on a coil of rope, which had formed part of the equipment in the canoe. The heaviest article had undoubtedly sunk to the bottom and the lightest had been swept away, but many articles of medium weight had been hurled upon the shore with the voyagers. Among them was the rope.

Geoff pounced upon it and lashed it to the middle of a festoon of creeper that hung from overhead. In its other

end he tied two loops, one above the other—no time there was to calculate lengths—slipped the loop over his shoulders and jumped into the water.

No swimming was necessary; a mere chip in the furious current, he was whisked away and carried toward the vent. Pedro saw him coming, but was too far gone to do anything but cling and wait.

Swiftly Geoff was borne down. Once his progress was sharply checked and he glanced back and saw that the rope had snarled; a second later the snarl gave way, and again he shot on. Too late he saw that the rope was too long; it would let the water carry him well past the drowning man. As a last desperate effort he lifted the lower loop in his right hand and tossed it over Pedro's head as he swept past, not knowing whether it would close about the man's neck and strangle him, but sure that his action afforded the only chance.

But Pedro understood; as the rope closed about his neck he loosed his hold on the liana and thrust his arm through the noose; then both men were swept downward.

Luckily, the rope had nearly run out and luckily the vines to which Geoff had tied it held fast. They yielded as the current tugged at the men; then, overstrained, they whipped back, dragging Geoff and Pedro along the surface half submerged like a fish on an angler's line, only to drop them deep again when the elastic recoil had been satisfied.

How long the two swung in the balance they never knew. Hours afterward, it seemed, Geoff opened his eyes and saw above him Frances' face. "You saved my life," he muttered; "even if you do think me a liar, you saved my life."

"Hush! You saved mine first. Don't I know? And—I—I—don't—I—God knows what I do think. Let us forget it all, and—and——" The girl rose. "You may sit up now," she said.

Geoff struggled up and looked about him. The professor was on his knees by Pedro, helping that individual to get up, and Don Sabas had evidently just risen to his feet from beside him. Pedro's eyes were open, but their expression showed that he was still dazed.

All of them had been severely bruised when they were flung against the rocks, though none of them had been seriously injured, and all of them except Don Sabas were nearly exhausted. Geoff and Pedro speedily recovered sufficiently to do good work in the salvaging, but the professor and Frances, never very muscular, very soon had to give up. However, the articles washed up were neither numerous nor large, and all of them were gathered on high ground before the time of the next flood.

Soon the well-remembered murmur was swelling on the air again. Swiftly it deepened, and then once more the living water sprang from the mouth of the gorge and hurled itself crashing into the quiet pool.

At the sight Frances hid her face in her hands. "God," she faltered, "were we beneath that?"

Geoff did not answer. He was leaping down the rocks to the edge of the waters as they lashed the shore. Far over he leaned, clutching at something with his right hand, while he anchored himself to the creeper with his left. For a moment he struggled, then he drew back, dragging from the clutch of the waves something long and large, wrapped in a mantle of glistening silk.

He drew it up in the sands out of reach of the water, then he turned.

"Professor," he called, "come down. The waves have brought us another victim of the White Death."

CHAPTER TEN

THE body of the new victim of the White Death differed in appearance from the one that the professor and Geoff had seen at Curilla and still more markedly from the one that Geoff and Rafferty had seen at the mouth of the Paribo months before. The last two had plainly traveled for many miles through the swamp and the canyon and down the river, and had been beaten against all sorts of obstructions. Naturally, the silky covering had been torn and ripped until it formed only a tenuous veil through which the body was measurably visible. It spoke wonders for the buoyancy of the hollow watertight filaments that even when so wrecked they were able to sustain the bodies at the surface.

Far different was the corpse that Geoff had snatched from the basin. At first glimpse indeed there was nothing about it to indicate that a human body formed the nucleus of the cocoon-like shape that glistened in the sunlight. From end to end the matted filaments formed a sheath so dense that it hid the contents and concealed their character; yet none of the five doubted that Geoff had stated the truth when he declared that the water had brought to their feet another victim of the White Death.

At Geoff's call the other four hurried down and stood staring. Pedro and Don Sabas crossed themselves and muttered prayers. Frances stared in wondering horror, not quite able to believe all in a moment that she was really gazing at the dead. Geoff had turned away and was examining his right hand, which had unaccountably begun to smart and burn, and which was obviously swelling. The professor had also turned away after a single glance and was peering about the ground, apparently in desperate anxiety.

"My glasses!" he cried. "My glasses! Has anybody seen them?"

Nobody had, and nobody seemed much concerned. All were too interested in the body.

With a despairing gesture the professor abandoned the search and dropped on his knees beside the body, bending down till his eyes were only a few inches from it. With quivering fingers he tried to pull apart the sheath at what appeared to be its upper end. The elastic covering gave, but did not break, and the professor looked up impatiently. "Give me a knife," he ordered. "A knife—quick!"

Geoff came out of his trance. "Hold on, professor!" he exclaimed. "Careful; that stuff's poisonous. See what it's done to my hand." He held up his palm, splotched over with great patches of swellings of red and white.

Frances sprang forward with a cry, and the professor scrambled quickly to his feet. "Good heavens," he cried, "do you think——"

"I remember my hands burned in the same way when I handled that single filament at Curilla. The stuff seems to be poisonous. This is plainly fresher and is probably more virulent." Geoff spoke quietly, but a flush of pain swept across his face.

"Let me look at it," Frances' voice quivered as she reached for the hand.

But Geoff held it back. "Don't touch it, please," he said. "It might be contagious, and anyway I don't think I could bear to have it handled. Professor, can you suggest anything?"

Professor Meekerton wrung his hands. "Plenty, plenty, my poor boy," he cried; "but alas, I can only suggest. All my material is lost. I have——"

"Ahi, señor!" It was Pedro, who had pushed to Geoff's side. No one had noticed him go away, but he had evidently gone and come back, for his hands were full of leaves. "Ahi, señor," he said in his own tongue, "chew some of these and rub the pulp on your hands, while I pound the rest between stones; quickly, señor, before the pain grows too great."

Geoff guessed at the meaning of the words and acted promptly. He grasped several leaves and shoved them into his mouth. A moment later he took out the mass and began to mop his enormously swollen palm. Very quickly afterward Pedro came with a mass of pulped leaves, with which he deftly enveloped the whole hand. "Better soon, now," he said as Frances bound the poultice in place with her handkerchief.

Sure enough, Geoff experienced almost instant alleviation. The strained look disappeared from his face and the tenseness of his jaws relaxed.

Meanwhile the professor was once more searching for his glasses, while Don Sabas was staring at the cocoon. "You see, señor," he remarked, "why the fish and the creeping things of the swamp have not destroyed the

body. You see, too, that it was not for nothing that the people of Curilla object that you touch that so unhappy victim."

"Eh? Oh, yes; no doubt. But my glasses, my glasses, what a misfortune." Despairingly he pered around. "Frances, can't you find my glasses?"

Frances, who had been watching the suffering die out of Geoff's face, turned hastily. "Yes, yes, father; I'll find them," she promised. "You—you've got your rubber gloves, haven't you? They were in your pocket, and——"

"Yes, yes." The professor delved into his pocket and brought to light the gloves, which he drew over his fingers with a slight lightening of the gloom that had enveloped him. "But find my glasses; find them, for heaven's sake." Once more he dropped on his knees beside the cocoon. "Your sword, Pedro!" he cried impatiently.

Pedro, at the professor's demand, passed over the weapon with some hesitation, and the professor began with infinite care to split the sheath which enveloped the body, parting it from side to side.

The face exposed was that of an Indian, but it was like no face that the professor had ever seen before, except in the coffin of a three-thousand-year dead mummy. The skin clung so close to the bones that it was clear the flesh had dried away to nothingness. The cheeks still lasted, but they were shrunken to paper thinness. The eyes had disappeared, though a suggestion of them was visible at the very bottom of the cavernous sockets.

Frances, after one glance, turned away and hid her face in her hands. Geoff swore, and Don Sabas and Pedro muttered desperately.

The professor seemed the least moved, perhaps because he could not see the condition of the body so plainly as the others; perhaps, however, he was too much occupied by other revelations, for, after a feverish inspection, with his eyes only an inch or two from the dead face, he straightened up with something like terror on his face and began to cut at the lower parts of the cocoon, exposing the brown body. For a few minutes he worked desperately, and at last with a feverish gesture he sprang to his feet, seized the body, tore it from the sheath, and laid it upon the ground at one side.

Then he sank back, staring. "My God!" he cried. "My God! The sheath is separate—separate!"

Don Sabas said nothing, and Geoff only looked puzzled. "What difference does that make, professor?" he asked hesitantly.

"What difference? What difference? It makes a—— But, no; I must be wrong. The filaments must be rooted in the body. Oh, if I only had my glasses. Look, Don Sabas! Look, Geoff! Surely you can find the roots; they are broken, of course, but they must be there. Look! Look!"

Geoff bent and looked, and Don Sabas followed suit, shuddering as he did so; then both shook their heads. "What does their absence prove, professor?" asked Geoff.

"It proves that the sheath is not the result of some fungous disease or of some minute insect pest; it proves that it originated apart from the body, that it was woven in place by some outside being—see?" The professor pointed to the body. "See, the arms are bound with cables of filaments, bound so that they cannot move. The victim was bound and then wrapped and rewrapped with the poisoned filaments; and then—then——"

"Well, then—then——" Geoff glanced at his bandaged hand; he could imagine the torture of the filaments if they enveloped a living body. "Then——"

But the professor was staring blankly. "Then——" he muttered. "Yes, what then? That's the question. How did——" He stooped and lifted the body once more. "See how light it is?" he babbled. "It is mere skin and bones and hollowness." Abruptly he turned the body on its side, disclosing an almost invisible orifice. "Here it is!" he declared. "Here it is. Here is where the liquids were drawn off. Here—just where the priests of ancient Egypt drew them off when they transformed the body into a mummy."

"Mummies!" Geoff started violently. "Priests! You think the White Death is——"

"No, no; I don't think anything. It's not possible, of course, and yet I tell you that some outside agency bound that man in poisoned fetters, sheathed him in poisoned silk, and made him into something so like a mummy that few can tell the difference. Oh, I wish I had my glasses, I wish I had my glasses."

Don Sabas and Geoff looked at each other, but neither spoke. Whatever their ideas, they kept them to themselves, and Geoff, at least, found something else to trouble him. His hand was much easier, but the sun was shining straight into his eyes, giving unmistakable warning that it had sunk very low and that night was at hand and rousing him to the realization that the party was miles from shelter, without fire or cooked food, and with less than half its proper equipment. Clearly, there was no time for further delay.

"Look at the sun," he cried. "It'll be pitch black in half an hour. We must get ready for night. Anybody got any matches?"

Nobody had. Geoff had carried some in a waterproof match-box, but it had been lost in the wreck. Geoff looked blue for a moment, then he glanced at the sun. "Maybe it'll work," he muttered. "Here, Pedro, gather some dry stuff—grass, bark, chaff and all that—quick!"

Pedro nodded and began his quest. Geoff took a pistol-bullet from the belt that still enwrapped his waist, broke it open and poured the powder in a small piece of fibrous dry bark. Dampening it with water, he smeared it over the bark, then held it in the sun, which, though low, was still hot, until it dried. By this time Pedro had brought more fibrous stuff, and Geoff, after arranging it carefully, borrowed Frances' watch and used the lens to concentrate the dying sunlight upon it.

For a minute or two it was touch and go, for the sun was almost on the horizon. Then the bark began to smoulder, and a tiny flame curled up along its edge. Carefully tended, it grew till the danger of its sudden extinction was past; then Geoff, lighting a wisp of dried grass, carried it well to the far side of the basin, where the low-hung branches of a lone tree, which had somehow found rootage in the bare rocks, offered some shelter against the night.

As he straightened up from building the fire, the now familiar roar broke on his ears, and he turned to watch the water leap from the gorge. As he turned he heard Frances shriek and saw the professor, who was still bending over the body, rise bewilderedly from the basin's edge, glare for a moment at the flashing flood, and then run madly up the slope. At his very heels the hungry water snapped, then sank back with a hissing roar.

When it went it took with it the corpse of the victim and the sheath that had enwrapped him.

And, irony of ironies, it washed up the professor's glasses and left them at his very feet.

As he stooped to pick them up the sun dropped out of sight behind the spur of the mountains.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE five adventurers slept well that night, exhausted both by the strenuous physical racking they had experienced and by the mental strain occasioned by the finding of the body of the victim of the White Death, and the professor's disquieting discoveries—or hypothesis—in regard to it.

Geoff was the first to wake the next morning. Raising himself on his elbow, he gazed for a moment at the sleeping forms of his companions; then he rose and slipped cautiously through the curtain formed by the low-hanging boughs of the trees onto the patch of rocks and sand that edged the basin. There he stood and stared about him.

Daylight had lasted for so short a space after the catastrophe of the day before, and the time allowed had been so filled with excitement and labor that Geoff had had no chance to study the surroundings. Now, for the first time, he would do so at leisure.

Escape, there seemed to be none; to right and to left the jutting spur hung precipitously above the swamp, ap-

parently cutting off all passage. Behind lay the jungle, intraversable except by boat. In front was the mountain, unscalable, penetrated only by the gorge, up which Geoff could see for only about a hundred yards before a turn in the course cut off the view. Up this gorge lay the road the party wished to take, and up it lay, too, the only apparent road by which they could leave the spot where they were marooned.

It occurred to Geoff that it would be well to explore the gorge as far up as he could between floods. He determined to try it after the next torrent had passed.

He looked up and saw Frances watching him. Flushed with sleep, rosy with the crispness of the dawn, she looked very fair to one who had eyes to see. "Good-morning!" she called. "What on earth are you doing?"

Geoff glanced down at his work. "I'm arranging a cross in memory of the poor devil we found in the cocoon yesterday," he said.

"A cross?"

"Yes; I'm not a Catholic, but I guess he was, and a cross hurts no one. I made it out of white rocks, as you see."

"I see," the girl spoke doubtfully. Clearly she found Geoff's action surprising. "How are your hands?" she asked.

"Practically well; Pedro's remedy was very effective." As Geoff spoke he joined the girl and walked past the tree, toward the basin. The time for another flood must be near, and he must circle the basin to a point of vantage from which to make his rush into the gorge.

"I'm glad to see you," he said; "I'm particularly glad because I want to borrow your watch."

"Borrow my watch?" Frances glanced in puzzled fashion at the small timepiece in the bracelet on her wrist. "What——"

"I'm going to investigate the gorge. I'll start up the moment the next flood passes, and go as high as I can and yet have time to get back safely. I want your watch, so as to keep track of the time."

"But why explore the gorge at all?"

"Because we'll probably have to go up it; there's no other way to go. Look at the mountain."

"Then you think the—the—what we seek is inside the crater?"

"It's bound to be. The water that brings the bodies must start high up; it couldn't come with so much force unless it did. It can't start on the other side of the mountain and flow up and then down again. No; it starts in the crater, and to get to its source we've got to go up the gorge. There's no other road, and of course we've got to investigate all we can first."

"But can people live in a crater?"

"Lord, yes; they do in several parts of the world. There's a crater on a West Indian island that holds a good-sized town. More, it contains a good live, smoking conelet; and there are plenty of others where people have lived from time to time. Oh, yes; the people we are hunting for can live here, all right."

Frances had leaned forward and was listening with strained attention; as Geoff finished, she nodded. "You're right," she said; "I'll go with you."

"You?" Geoff was startled. "Oh, no," he objected hurriedly; "one is enough. One can find out as well as a dozen, and one can hurry faster than a dozen."

"And one can get hurt and have nobody to help him. No; if you go I'll go, too."

But Geoff shook his head vigorously. "You can't," he protested.

"Why not?"

"Because—because you can't run the risk."

"Is it more risky for me than for you? I'm not so strong as you others; perhaps I can't hit so hard or lift so much, but I can run as fast and as long as any of you. I'm going."

"Pardon me, but you are not," Geoff spoke sternly. His heart was glowing within him at the girl's wish to accompany him, but he had not the slightest intention of permitting her to do so, and he knew that he should have to speak sternly to deter her.

"But I am; I'm going, if you do." The girl's voice showed that her mind was made up.

Geoff's jaws stiffened. "You are not," he said; "I won't argue with you any longer. I haven't time. The water will be here in a minute. I'll treat you like the child you are; I am going up that gorge and I'm going alone. I am not going to risk my life for a fool boy. You will either promise me to stay here quietly, or I will tie you to that tree and make you stay—understand?"

Every drop of blood fled from Frances' face. "You dare!" she spluttered.

Geoff nodded. "Yes, I dare," he answered steadily. "Oh, I know you think I'm your father's servant and owe you obedience; but all our lives are at stake and I've got to do what I think is right, and I'll do it. Now, will you promise, or shall I——"

"I'll promise," Frances spoke faintly. She did not look at Geoff; meekly she unbuckled the watch. "You—you will be careful?" she begged.

Geoff's heart melted, but he tried to harden his face and voice. "Yes, I'll be careful," he promised. "I'm sorry I spoke so harshly," he stammered; "but——"

"You were right." Frances raised her head. "You were quite right. I'm not angry; you were quite right." She pressed the watch into his hand. "Take it," she said.

Geoff took it and fastened the buckle about his arm. "Thank you," he said; "I want you to believe—believe——"

"I do believe; good-by." Frances held out her hands.

Geoff took them; his face worked strangely. Good-by," he said in an altered voice. "If—— Hark!"

The intermittent roar of the coming water swelled on the air, and Geoff broke off. "Good-by," he repeated, hastily dropping the girl's hand and running around the pool, standing ready. As the flood passed and the gushing water subsided he darted into the mouth of the gorge.

The ascent was steep—in places very steep—but that it was not nearly so steep as the slope of the mountain-side in which it was cut was shown by the sharpness with which the height of the sides increased.

At last he slackened his pace. "No go," he decided. "We'll have to wait for Rafferty and the airship; we couldn't possibly make it." He glanced at his watch again, then he stopped short. The hands still marked twenty minutes past the hour; the watch had stopped.

For quite a minute Geoff stood motionless, staring at the white dial across which the black hands had written his death-warrant. He knew it was his death-warrant; he did not know how long he had been climbing, but he knew beyond peradventure of doubt that he had come too far to hope to get back; he knew that only a few minutes, perhaps only a few seconds, remained before the next torrent would descend and sweep him away to inevitable death between the walls that still towered overhead with no sign of break. It seemed incredible that within a few moments he would be only a lifeless shell, battered and crushed, floating in the basin or being borne down the channel through the swamp on the crest of the flood; but he could see no escape.

But he did not give up; till the very last moment he would fight for his life. He was not the sort that submits, that sits down and waits tamely for fate, however inevitable. He was the sort that goes to meet it, beaten but unafraid.

It was too late to go back; to go forward was his only hope. Desperately he ran on and up, questioning the rocks meanwhile for some inequality, even the smallest, by which he might climb above the flood, listening the while for the resonant murmur that was the herald of the silver death.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BESIDE the dying turmoil of the torrent Frances stood, staring up the gorge at the turn in the channel around which Geoff had disappeared; then she covered her face with her hands and sank down on the ground. "He's gone to his death," she wailed; "I'll never see him again."

A step behind her roused her, and she jumped up hurriedly, hastily drying her eyes as she did so, remembering that she must play the man and hoping that she had not betrayed herself.

It was only the professor, however, anxious to see and talk with some one.

As Frances looked at him her heart sank. In the last few days he had visibly aged; his pluck was good and his expression obviously cheerful, but no resolution nor strength of mind could negative the effect of his advancing years.

"Good-morning, my dear," he prattled. "Where is Geoff?"

Frances explained. "I know it's foolish," she ended; "there oughtn't to be any danger if he's careful. But I'm afraid—afraid!"

The professor nodded. "Dear me," he sighed, "I hope he won't get caught by the water. Good gracious, what's that?"

"That" was a ball of smoke, roughly circular, that was rising beyond the camping-tree and soaring skyward. Far up it went and then suddenly disintegrated, shredding away into the filmy clouds that glimmered white in the sunlight. The professor and Frances watched it till it disappeared, then they dropped their eyes to the tree beyond which it had risen.

"There's another!" they exclaimed together.

Another it was, and still another followed; then the series ended abruptly.

The professor sighed. "Interesting, most interesting!" he exclaimed. "Don Sabas or Pedro must be lighting the fire. It is curious that in so doing they should produce smoke-balls such as those used by our own North American Indians for signaling to each other." Frances' lips hardened; a suspicion was dawning upon her. "Perhaps Don Sabas has found friends and is signaling to them," she suggested.

"Father, father, don't you know me?"

"Friends? Don Sabas? Why, my dear, you forget where you are. Don Sabas has never been here before."

"Hasn't he? Well, suppose we watch the mountain-side and see whether his smoke-balls are answered."

Five minutes, ten minutes, drifted by while the two scanned the mountains for smoke that would tell that some spy or traitor in the camp was trying to communicate with his associates. None came, however, and at last Frances gave it up.

"I suppose they were accidental," she said. "If you'll go and find out how they're made I'll follow you in a minute. Some things have been washed up on the beach, and I want to get them."

The professor went very willingly, while Frances turned down to the water's edge and busied herself in picking up the fresh salvage of water and in watching the mountain-side.

She was by no means satisfied that the smoke-balls were accidental, and she was determined to know if any answers were made to them. If there were—if there were—— Her heart sickened within her as she thought what an answer would portend. She must know, she must know.

For five minutes longer she watched in vain, then slowly followed the professor.

Pedro and Don Sabas were bending over the fire, which was crackling merrily. Close by lay a sort of pad or mantle of matted grass and weeds, which had evidently just been pulled off the flames, for it was still smoking.

Close at hand the professor was looking on interestedly. As Frances appeared he called to her excitedly.

"Frances, Frances," he clamored, "get your note-book, quick!"

Frances advanced, but she shook her head. "I'm sorry, father," she answered, "but I haven't any note-book. All my note-books were lost in the wreck. I haven't anything but a frying-pan that I've just found." She held it up. "Was there something interesting you wanted to describe?"

"Interesting? Yes; oh, what a misfortune not to be able to keep notes. Oh, yes—interesting? Surely! Don Sabas has been showing me a new way to make a fire. You cover it with a layer of damp fiber and grass till the smoke accumulates; then you jerk the pad off and the smoke rushes upward, creating a strong draft that makes the fire blaze up. It's very interesting."

"I see; that is, I'd like to see. Won't you show me, Don Sabas?"

Don Sabas hesitated. Pedro set an iron bucket of water on the fire, and Don Sabas shrugged his shoulders. "Manana, señor; I shall be charmed," he said. "Now the pangs of hunger demand that we hasten the breakfast, is it not so? Besides, the draft forms not well when the fire glows so hotly as at present."

Frances' heart sank lower than ever. Don Sabas' words rang hollow in her ears; they were an excuse—a mere excuse. Don Sabas was a traitor. He was in league with the man who had held her father prisoner, who perhaps had murdered him. He had signaled to his friends; soon they would come, and then——

How would they come? Clearly by way of the gorge. There seemed no other way for them to come. They would meet Geoff, and——"

Oh, if Geoff were only back. Surely the hour must be nearly spent.

Desperately she turned back to the mouth of the gorge, and as she did so she lifted her eyes to the rim of the crater, just in time to see a smoke-ball soar upward, far beyond it, and dissolve against the vault of the sky. With clasped hands she watched till another and yet another followed.

It was the answer—the final proof that Don Sabas was a traitor.

Blankly, scarcely knowing what she did, she stared westward toward the great mountains that ran down into the

swamp. Out there, partly screened from the camp, lay the cross of white stones that she had seen Geoff building. Desperately she walked toward it and stood looking down at that symbol of the Christian faith.

By and by she noticed that the center stone was a little awry, and mechanically she stooped to adjust it. Her fingers touched something unusual, and with suddenly roused attention she turned the stone and saw a note.

For a moment she hesitated. Geoff had put the note there, she knew, and he had not meant it for her. Had she the right to read it?

But she unfolded it and read:

"DEAR TOM—We've lost our canoe and are marooned here, with no way out except up the gorge. I'm going up it in a few minutes to see what I can do. I hope nothing has happened to you. Your not being here worries me."

The girl broke off. "Not being here?" she murmured. "How could he be here? How could he pass us? Oh, what does it all mean?"

Once more she bent her head and read:

"If you don't hear from me further, use your own judgment. Only, Tom, you must save Frances. She's the dearest girl——"

"Girl!" A furious blush dyed the girl's cheeks. "So he knew! He knew!"

Desperately she read on:

"—the dearest girl I ever knew, sweet and brave and long enduring. If I croak get her back to God's country, Tom. Yours, GEOFF."

Passionately the girl raised the letter to her lips and kissed it. "No, no!" she cried in sudden abandon. "No, no! Never without you, Geoff; never without you, dear."

For a moment she hesitated; then took a stub of pencil from her pocket and added a line or two, explaining about the signals she had intercepted. "Save him, Mr. Rafferty," she added. "Save Geoff for me.—Frances."

Hastily she scribbled the lines, and, furtively glancing about her to make sure that no one was watching, she replaced the note; then, suddenly remembering that time was flying, she jumped up and ran back to the mouth of the gorge and stared anxiously into its winding depths.

Abruptly a voice spoke behind her and she turned to see Don Sabas close at her elbow. Behind him she saw Pedro shouldering what remained of the camp equipment. Still farther back she saw the professor frowning in puzzled fashion. "What is it, Don Sabas?" she asked coldly.

The Spanish-American bowed. "I have decided that we follow Señor Geoff up the gorge, señorita," he said. "We start at once."

Frances flushed crimson. "Señorita?" she gasped. So Don Sabas, too, was aware of her sex.

"But, yes; of a surety. It was perhaps wise of the señorita to play the man for the moment, but the need has passed. We have nearly arrived at the house of your father."

"My father?" A great throb of thankfulness swept through the girl's being.

"But of a certainty. We are not murderers; your father, like yourself, has insisted on forcing himself upon us. Bueno! we welcome him as we welcome you; we welcome him so much that we insist that he remain with us."

Frances nodded slowly, half to herself. Don Sabas' dropping of the mask did not come as a surprise or as a shock. She had discounted them in advance, and in any event they were swallowed up in her delight at knowing that her father lived. He was a prisoner, and she and the professor were apparently to join him in his captivity; but it bade fair to be a mild captivity, one to all appearances that she could easily endure till the time should come, as she did not doubt it would come, when the tables would be turned. It was as good, and indeed far better, than she had any right to expect.

Her eyes came back to Don Sabas, who was still bowing before her. "So you admit everything?" she asked scornfully.

Don Sabas shrugged his shoulders. "Why not?" he asked. "The señorita has seen the signals, has she not? Besides, there is no need to keep silent longer."

"You think not? And how, if I refuse to go further into your trap?" she inquired.

Don Sabas smiled. "Surely the señorita will not give me the misery of having to use force?" he murmured.

"I understand. Bueno, señor, I will go with you, if you insist; but first let me warn you that it is dangerous to play tricks on an American girl. Take my advice; release my father, explain to Professor Meekerton the secret of the White Death and furnish all of us with transportation back home."

Don Sabas shook his head. "It desolates me to refuse, señorita," he declared; "but——"

"Oh, very well. Remember that I warned you. Now, what do you want me to do?"

Don Sabas pointed. "If the señorita will accompany us up the gorge," he said.

"Up the gorge!" Frances spun around, white to the lips. "The water!" she cried. "Oh, it must be time for it—it must be—and Geoff has not come back. For God's sake, Don Sabas, stop the water and save him. For God's sake!"

"And how can I stop the water, señorita?" Don Sabas' lips curled wickedly.

"By signaling; by your smoke-balls. Oh, for pity's sake, señor!"

Don Sabas waved his hand airily. "Give yourself no concern, señorita. Señor Geoff has gone out of your life and it is not likely that you will see him more; but of a truth his life is safe. He is a very lucky man, is Señor Geoff. He have plucked the eye-whiskers of death and have escape. He start up the gorge at the minute that I signal to stop the water. My men have stopped it. Therefore, Señor Geoff lives. If I had not signal he would be dead. Bueno, señorita, shall we proceed?" He waved his hand toward the gorge.

Frances nodded; an enormous weight seemed lifted from her heart. Geoff was safe, for the moment at least. He had escaped the perils of water, and somehow the girl felt sure he would also escape the lesser perils of man.

Eagerly she turned to Don Sabas. "Bueno, señor," she said; "it is well. Let us go; I am ready."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SIDE by side, or in single file, as the exigencies of the way demanded, the party ascended the gorge. The mountain, Don Sabas explained, was indeed a volcano, whose huge elliptical crater, fifteen miles long by ten wide, testified to the frightful power of the molten forces that had been manifest there in the days when the earth was young. Inside of it was a small volcanic cone a few hundred feet in height, which had evidently been built up after the fires of the great volcano had died away forever. This cone, like the main crater, was practically dead, though a faint ribbon of vapor, almost imperceptible, at times curled up from its apex.

The walls of the crater, he explained, were enormously high—over two thousand feet at their lowest point—and were, like those of the canyon, unbroken and absolutely unscalable. Against the far, or southern, wall a good-sized lake bathed the western slope of the live conelet. From this lake the Paribo flowed to a smaller lake at the northern side, from which it emptied into the gorge.

"I tell you this, señorita, and you, señor," went on Don Sabas, "for on its correct understanding your lives depend. Within the crater, on the west side, you may come and go almost as you desire; but for your own sakes, for your lives' sakes you must not cross the river to the east. It is not I who forbid this; it is the law of the crater. East of the river lies the domain of the White Death. I,

and I only, may cross the stream, and I may do it only because by virtue of my fated life; I am lord of the White Death and of all other deaths besides. It does not molest me."

Frances gazed at the man perplexedly, wondering whether he could indeed be in earnest.

The professor's eyes gleamed. "I see," he exclaimed.

"Ten years ago I and my friends, led by an Indian, discovered this place," said Don Sabas. "In it we found that which we sought. Later I may tell you of this, or your friend Braxton may tell you, and of why we have kept it secret from the world. At that time the whole valley was safe, and we ranged through it freely. It had been occupied of old and contained many ancient buildings. We brought workmen, and did that which we came to do. At last, however, a man blundered into our hands —a German professor, Adolph Kleinschmidt by name——"

"Kleinschmidt? He is here?" The professor's interruption was a cry of amazement.

Don Sabas nodded. "He was here," he answered. "He is dead now. You knew of him, señor?"

"Who didn't? He was a naturalist, chemist, a Burbank."

"Too much so for his own good, señor. We did not want him here. We never really knew how he got here; but once here we could not let him go. He was very angry; but at last he seemed to acquire the resignation. He offered to help us in our work and we made a laboratory for him in one of the buildings on the east side of the river. Of a truth, he did help us; but he hated us, too, because we would not let him go. In his laboratory, in secret, he bred and cross-bred venomous things until he evolved the White Death. At the last, six years ago, the thing, whatever it was, turned upon him and killed him and escaped. We found him wrapped in the silver sheath, the first victim of his own creature. We also found his notes, describing his experiments and rejoicing in the revenge he hoped to take upon us.

"At first we did not fully understand; later we did. Ah, yes; of a verity, we understood. In the woods east of the river the thing increased and multiplied. After a while it descended upon us. It slew and spared not. Even my two partners it slew; but always to the east and never to the west of the river. Little by little we learned that it never crossed the river. We guessed that it could not cross. So we ourselves crossed and abandoned to it the whole eastern half of the crater. I, and only I, remain. Nightly I sleep east of the river in the laboratory where Kleinschmidt wrought. The others stay to the west."

"So you gave up the fight?" Frances asked the question.

"We gave it up, yes; but not without a struggle. Again and again did I try to hunt the thing down, but never once did I find it. Always I left some of my men behind, later to be found wrapped in the silken sheath. At last, out of pity to my men, I gave up; I myself remain on the east side of the river, braving the White Death, which dares not to attack me, its lord and master; but no more do I ask my men to tempt its power."

Frances was breathing heavily; even the professor seemed disturbed. "And it has never crossed the river?" he asked.

"Never, señor; we are convinced that it cannot."

"And you've never seen this creature—this White Death?"

"Never, señor; we know not whether it is big or little, whether it is a reptile or an insect, or merely a germ. We know not if it is only a single creature or if it is in thousands. Your father, señorita, has tried to fathom its nature. He has had access to all the notes and all the implements of the Señor Kleinschmidt, but he has been able to discover nothing. We have offered him anything he desires if he can succeed—anything."

"Except liberty." It was Frances who spoke.

"That, too, in time; we can not hope to keep our secret forever. Sooner or later it must be revealed, but we will keep it while we can."

The professor was not listening. Scarcely he waited for Don Sabas to finish. "The artificial evolution of monsters in the laboratory is by no means rare," he declared; "but such monsters have invariably been sterile. They have begotten no offspring; also, too, they have invariably been short-lived. Kleinschmidt might very well have evolved a monster centipede or spider or something of the sort, but it is very improbable that it would have survived for six years or have left descendants. Even if it had left descendants they would surely have reverted to a type, becoming smaller and smaller in each generation, until they were no longer what they were before he bred them. Therefore, considering also that you never succeeded in seeing the creature, I should infer that the White Death is infinitely little, and attains its results by multitude of numbers rather than by size of individuals. However, it is too soon to speculate; later we shall see."

"Bueno; you shall have every chance. But remember, señor, do not venture across the river. To do so is to die."

The professor shrugged his shoulders. "To die is nothing," he said. "We all have to die sooner or later, and my time is short, at best. Still, I shall not run needless risks, of course. Hello, what's that?"

"That" was a distinct tremor that ran through the rocks beneath the feet of the party. It lasted a few seconds, then died away.

Frances' cheeks blanched. "It's the water," she gasped. "It's coming!"

Don Sabas' cheeks also were pale, and he spoke with an effort. "No, it is not the water," he declared. "It is— I know what it is."

The four had been steadily climbing. The streak of sky visible about their heads, after narrowing to a line so distant that its bounding walls were a mere blur, had suddenly widened. Now, abruptly, a rush of daylight from ahead somewhere permeated the canyon, dispelling its almost funereal gloom. Don Sabas noticed it and turned to Frances with evident determination to change the subject.

"We are nearly at our journey's end, señorita," he said. "The entrance to the valley lies around the turn just ahead."

Frances had guessed as much already, and had been looking anxiously about her. She could not understand why she could not see Geoff.

"I don't see Geoff," she observed to Don Sabas uneasily.

"Geoff!" Don Sabas forced a laugh. "Truly, I myself have wonder where el Señor Geoff has hide himself," he remarked. "Perhaps we shall find him hiding at the foot of the dam, and perhaps he has been sensible and has surrender and ask that he be given to eat. Soon we shall see."

Frances quickened her pace; she was anxious and she did not like Don Sabas' tones. Very quickly she reached the turn in the rocks that Don Sabas had pointed out, and rounded it. Then she stopped, dazzled by the glow of the sky that shone into her eyes above the crest of a great dam of squared rocks that filled the gorge from side to side. Along its top, forty feet from the ground, showed the heads and shoulders of half a dozen men. In the face, just above the floor of the canyon, was set a panel, which Frances guessed closed a sluiceway by which the torrent was allowed to rush out of the lake and down the gorge.

No means of passage appeared. The face of the dam, though rough and slightly sloping, was far too steep to be climbed by any except an athlete. There was no sign of Geoff.

Don Sabas' thoughts evidently ran parallel with those of the girl. "He is not here, señorita," he observed; "therefore he must have surrender. Bueno!" He raised his face toward the top of the dam and called a sharp order.

Some one at the top answered, and a moment later an oblong yawned in the face of the rock at the left, revealing the bottom of a flight of stone steps.

Don Sabas stepped inside; from a shelf he took a candle and lighted it. Then he stood aside, waving his hand toward the stairway. "After you, señorita, señor," he invited.

Frances entered, followed by the others. As she passed the portal she noticed that the doorway consisted of a single slab of stone, apparently set on a pivot. A moment later, as she set her foot on the lowest stair, she heard it close behind her with a thud.

The climb, though steep, was not different, nor did it take long. The candle gave abundant light, and in a very few moments Frances found herself stepping through a second doorway into a sort of guard-chamber, where four or five natives of assorted shades of yellow and brown, dressed in military uniforms, stood waiting. To these the girl nodded pleasantly, determined to provoke no unnecessary hostility.

Just behind her the professor emerged and stood blinking in the light that streamed in through a big open door. Don Sabas shouldered by the two and strode forward. At sight of him the soldiers came to attention, and one, who seemed to be in command, took a step forward and saluted. "Como va, señor," he said.

Don Sabas returned the salute carelessly. "Where is the man who came up the canyon an hour or less ago?" he demanded sharply. He spoke in Portuguese, but Frances knew enough of the tongue to guess his meaning.

The officer looked blank. "What man, señor?" he faltered.

Don Sabas' olive face flushed darkly. "Blockhead!" he roared. "How many men have come up the gorge this morning?"

"None, señor."

"None?" Don Sabas' eyes widened.

"None, señor; not any. Of a truth, none, señor."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FOR a moment Don Sabas stared blankly at the officer; then suddenly his eyes narrowed and his jaws snapped. "Liar!" he roared. "A man preceded us up the gorge by one hour. He must have come here. Where is he?"

The officer grew pale; evidently he was frightened. "No man has come, señor," he insisted. "No one has come. Nothing has happened except—except the earthquake."

"The earthquake? Fool, there was no earthquake!"

"But, yes, señor," the officer stammered and quailed; "but, yes, señor. Did not the señor feel it? I think that it came from the volcano."

For a moment Don Sabas stood glaring at the man, who shifted and squirmed uneasily; then abruptly he pushed past him and strode out through the door into the open air.

Frances followed him, then stopped, staring amazed at the scene that stretched before her.

She stood at the edge of a vast amphitheater, from which a circle of perpendicular walls soared upward without visible break except one just behind her. At her feet lapped the waters of a basin, many times larger than that at the edge of the swamp, on which the sunlight lay golden. Through the green expanse of the valley wound a placid stream. West of it the land seemed to be cultivated, and here and there the girl caught the glint of whitewashed walls. East of it spread a tangled jungle. The lake filled all the immediate foreground except for a narrow pathway around the western side; on the east the water lapped directly against the cliffs. Far away a small volcanic conelet rose almost as high as the top of the bounding cliffs. From its top a thin column of smoke curled upward and dissipated in the air. Frances decided that it must be nearly invisible from the basin at the foot of the gorge. With dawning misgivings she watched it.

As she stared, the officer went on. "Truly, señor," he said, "truly the tremblor have occur many times in the last month, ever since el volcan have begun to smoke. We have watch it daily."

Like a tiger Don Sabas sprang at the man's throat. "Dolt!" he screamed. "Ass! Fool! While you watched the smoke or slept, beasts that you are, the man climbed the face of the dam and made his way past you. But you shall pay, por Dios, you shall pay!"

The officer's face grew white. "But, señor, it is impossible," he whined. "No one could climb the dam and no one could pass here, no matter how much we watch the smoke. No, it is not possible."

"It is possible, because he has done it. See"—Sabas sought swiftly along the parapet of the dam—"see"—he pointed to the print of a muddy foot, drying in the sun—"he has left the mark of his passing. Here he mounted and yonder he went." He pointed eastward along the water's edge. "Yonder he went and you and your men shall go after him, swine that you are!"

The men's eyes widened and their cheeks whitened beneath the dirt and tan and the natural swarthiness. Their knees knocked together. The officer alone dared to protest. "But, señor, the White Death!" he gasped.

Don Sabas' face flamed. "Yes, the White Death!" he roared; "that or the fusillade against the wall at the morrow's dawn. Bring back the man and those that live shall be forgiven. Go!"

Since Frances had come upon the platform above the dam she had scarcely moved; with eyes and ears distended she had followed Don Sabas, straining desperately to understand the meaning of the words he uttered.

Very quickly she gathered that Geoff had climbed the dam and had made his way past the guards into the interior of the crater, and her heart leaped with joy to know that he was safe, for the moment at least. More slowly she realized that Don Sabas, insane with rage or fear, was ordering the men to follow him and that the order had filled them with dread. For a moment she supposed that they feared to pursue Geoff; somehow it seemed to her very natural that five men should fear to pursue one, if that one were Geoff. Then it dawned on her that their fear was not of Geoff, but of the White Death, and that Geoff had taken refuge in the side of the valley where it held sway; but it was not until she saw the extreme terror with which the men received Don Sabas' last order that she realized that, to them at least, the White Death was no scientific problem to be solved, but was a fearful reality, of whose deadliness they did not doubt. Until that moment she had accepted Don Sabas' assertion that the country to the east was dangerous, but she had not realized it.

The soldiers must have read her emotion in her face and must have interpreted it wrongly, for with one accord they suddenly pressed toward her, whining and begging. Their words were unintelligible, but their desire was plain. They were begging her to intercede for them.

Doubtfully she turned toward Don Sabas, pitying the men and only too willing to save Geoff from the human foes that seemed about to be added to the mysterious terrors of the forest.

But Don Sabas cut her short. "It's a matter of military discipline!" he snapped. "Have the goodness not to interfere." Then he turned to the men. "Be off!" he rasped, and slowly and fearfully they marched away.

Don Sabas watched till they had crossed the river and disappeared beneath the heavy mantle of trees. Then he turned to Pedro and gave a brief order, afterward turning back.

"We have no horses here, señorita," he said with reasonable composure; "but we have of burros a great abundance, all descended from half a dozen progenitors that we have brought through the swamp with much toil. They will take us the eight miles that lie between us and the town of Humachumac, beneath the smoke yonder," he pointed.

Frances forced a smile. "I shall be glad enough to ride," she said; "that climb was not easy."

Pedro's return with the burros, which had apparently been saddled in anticipation of the need of them, cut short the conversation, and the three mounted and rode away.

For nearly three hours the ride lasted; then, when the sun was visibly declining toward the west, the trees stopped and the party came out on the edge of an open plain, carefully cultivated, beyond which, a quarter of a mile away, stood a cluster of houses, large and small.

Beyond lay a lake several times as large as that at the mouth-end of the crater. West of the houses rose the smoking cone.

The burros quickened their pace, and very soon Frances could make out the nature of the buildings. Four or five of them were very large, and were apparently substantially built of stone; the others, eight or ten in number, were small structures of more flimsy character.

The buildings soon were very near, and men who had been watching from beneath the dense shadow of a wide portico were coming forward. Among them was a spare, sun-burnt man, obviously different in build and feature from the others.

Frances, staring eagerly, jumped from her burro and ran forward. "Father! Father!" she called. "Don't you know me?"

"No, I don't. Good Lord, it's never Frances! Frances, what are you doing here?" Mr. Braxton might well be pardoned for his slowness in recognizing his daughter.

Frances did not wait for him to finish. Laughing and sobbing, she threw herself into his arms. "We got your letter," she cried, "the one you sent in a bottle, and we've come to rescue you—the professor and I—and, oh, I'm so glad, so glad!"

Braxton patted the girl's bright hair. "There, there," he murmured; "there, it's all right. Daddy's brave girl; there, there! And Professor Meekerton"—he reached his hand over Frances' head and clasped that of the professor. "I don't know what to say. I had despaired long ago. You've come to rescue me, you say? How on earth——"

"Yes, of course, father." Frances laughed and cried at once. "We'll rescue you, all right. Don Sabas here thinks we are his prisoners, but we'll convince him differently after a while." The girl threw back her head and cast a glance at Don Sabas and his circle of listening friends. "Won't we, Don Sabas?" she asked.

Don Sabas scowled; but he looked a little uneasy. "The señorita is pleased to talk folly," he said shortly. "Señor Braxton, have the goodness to take your friends to your apartments and give them supper and make for them the comfort. They will stay with us a long time—oh, a very long time."

Braxton stared after Don Sabas as he strode away; then he turned to the others. "Come, Frances," he said; "come, professor. I'll try to make you comfortable."

Followed by the other two, he led the way into the huge building, whose massive architecture, carved and sculptured beyond belief—narrow passages and stairways and slits of windows—spoke of the age-long toil of a vanished race. "My rooms are in the east wing," he said; "in fact, I occupy the whole east end of the lower floor of the building and could occupy the upper floor, too, if I wanted to, for there is no one above me. So there's plenty of room for everybody. There aren't more than one hundred men in the crater and these buildings would house over a thousand. Here we are; here's my laboratory. Come in and sit down and tell me all about yourselves. I can't understand it yet."

The professor stumbled into the room, which was long and narrow and was well lighted through holes in the walls that were obviously much younger than the building. For a moment he blinked in the sudden light; then he spied a couch and made his way to it and dropped down. "So tired," he muttered; "so tired." He fell back and closed his eyes.

With paling cheeks Frances hurried to his side and bent over him.

But before she could speak Braxton drew her back. "Let him rest, Frances," he cautioned; "he must be dreadfully tired. Let him rest and sleep. Come over here and tell me everything, unless you're too tired."

Abruptly the girl's eyes filled with tears. "Tired!" she cried. "No, I'm not tired, and if I were it would not matter. I'm in desperate trouble; unless you can help me—help me—— Father, the man I love is here in the crater, a fugitive, wandering ignorantly east of the river, in the domain of the White Death. If he dies—if he dies—father, if he dies, I think I shall die, too."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"THE man you love!" Mr. Braxton stared at his daughter. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed; "and I've been thinking of you as still a little girl!" Then he noted the agony in the girl's face and drew her toward him. "There, there," he soothed; "it's going to be all right. I know it's going to be all right. Don't worry; it's all right. Tell me about it. Who is he?"

"His name is Geoff; that's the only name I know. He came up with us as boatman."

"As boatman?" Mr. Braxton stared.

"Yes, as boatman; but you mustn't misjudge him. I misjudged him at first. He was playing a part. He wanted to find out things about the men behind the White Death, and he went and lived with the riffraff and pretended to be a drunken loafer and all that. He told me this later. This morning, before Don Sabas spoke out, he started up the gorge to see whether we could get up it, and he never came back. Don Sabas had stopped the water, so he wasn't caught by that. When we came up we found that he had climbed the dam."

"Climbed the dam?"

"Yes; and slipped past the guards and gone across the river into the domain of the White Death. Of course, he didn't know that it was the domain of the White Death over there; but, anyway, I suppose he couldn't get anywhere else. Don Sabas sent the guards to hunt him down—five men with rifles—and they were frightened to death to go across the river. And, oh, father, you know he will come back safe, don't you? Tell me that you know he'll come back safe."

Braxton gathered the hysterical girl in his arms. "Of course he'll come back safe," he declared; "of course he will. There, there, dearie; of course he'll come back. Those men won't bother him; they'll be too scared—a long sight worse scared than they've got any real reason to be. The White Death isn't half so dangerous as the people here think—not half. I've been across the river three times and I'm alive to tell the tale. No; don't worry, baby. If your Geoff is a man of the courage he seems to be he'll win out, all right."

As Braxton went on, Frances began to regain control of herself. Her sobs ceased and she tried to dry her wet eyes. "But—but—what is the White Death, father?" she asked.

"Search me," Braxton answered heartily. He judged that to speak heartily would help to calm his daughter. "I've never seen it," he went on in a matter-of-fact, conversational tone. "I've seen its work, of course."

"So have I!" Frances shuddered.

"Well, you've seen as much as I have, then. I've never seen the thing itself. It doesn't fit in with anything I know or ever heard of elsewhere. Kleinschmidt must have bred a most extraordinary creature. The fact is, I'm in two minds about the thing. Of course, it may be what Don Sabas says and what the people here believe—some deadly creature, large or small, that broke loose from Kleinschmidt and that kills and spares not. Don Sabas ought to know, if anybody does, for he lives across the river, in the forbidden country, and in the same building that Kleinschmidt used as a laboratory. He says he doesn't know, but the Indians think he does. They say he rules the White Death and inflicts it on any one that opposes his will. He used to deny this, but lately he's been asserting that he is the lord of the White Death, and I'm beginning to wonder whether there isn't something in it. I've noticed that the thing is mighty selective in its killings. It always picks men that are mutinous or unruly or anxious to get away from here. That's what has made the Indians think what they do. Maybe Don Sabas really doesn't know everything, but I'll bet he knows a lot more about it than he'll admit and that it does its work with his consent and by his direction. Of course, if he can't catch your Geoff he can't sic his demons on him, you know. Those bodies that come down-stream and the tale of the White Death have been wonderful aids to him in keeping people out of this country. Of course, on the

other hand, they've been the factor that has drawn us up here. Still, I guess they've kept the secret safe for a good many years; but here, I want to know about that young man of yours. Tell me."

Frances explained; she told the whole story from beginning to end. "Before we left," she finished, "we fixed things so that if we didn't get back in a certain time, both the government and the newspapers would explode. Moreover, we set the Secret Service to work to discover why civilized men should want to hold you a prisoner here. The professor could see only one explanation."

"And what was that?"

"Diamonds! He guessed there were diamond mines up here, as there are elsewhere in Brazil."

"Bravo, he hit it! There are wonderful diamond mines here. Kimberly isn't in it with them. If they should be worked at full capacity diamonds would be as common as glass, and as worthless. Don Sabas saw that; Don Sabas and two other men discovered the mines, you know, and he determined to keep them secret, and he's done it. I guess he's taken out about a million dollars worth of diamonds a year for ten years, without a soul guessing. I don't know how he marketed them, but from things he's let out I fancy he's worked a combination with some big jeweler."

"That's what Professor Meekerton guessed. Mr. Carothers, the president of the arboretum board, you know, who prevented the board from sending the professor down here, is a very important jeweler. The professor told the Secret Service men what he believed, and advised them to check up Mr. Carothers' sales of diamonds by his imports. He thought that Mr. Carothers might be smuggling on a big scale. They hadn't found out anything when we left, but maybe they will before we get back."

An Indian boy came in and spoke to Braxton in a tongue unknown to the girl. Braxton answered and the boy went out and Braxton turned to Frances. "Supper is nearly ready," he explained. "I've told the boy to serve it on the roof, over our heads. It's cool there at this time of day. Better wake the professor and see how he feels."

The professor felt very well. The brief rest had helped him astonishingly and he was quite ready for the inevitable chilli con carne and tortillas of Spanish America.

Across the river stood a single building, evidently very ancient, which Frances rightly guessed was Kleinschmidt's old laboratory, and Don Sabas' present residence.

The ribbon of smoke from the cone first caught the eyes of the newcomers and they stared at it interestedly.

Braxton's eyes followed theirs, and he answered their unspoken thoughts. "Yes," he said, "that's the real danger here. It's taken to smoking lately and it's getting more and more excited every day. We've had several small earthquakes."

"We felt one to-day."

"Well, they're getting stronger; if they keep on we'll have to take to sleeping in the open air. It's no joke to be in a stone building in an earthquake. I've got an idea that this crater is going to be untenable before long. The people are getting mighty uneasy now; but of course Don Sabas will hold on as long as he can."

"Because of the diamonds?"

"Because of the diamonds." Braxton led the way to the edge of the roof. "Yonder is the diamond-pit," he explained, pointing to a huge hole that gaped in the earth about a quarter of a mile away, near the edge of the lake. "The blue earth that holds the diamonds occurs just as it does at Kimberly," he said. "That is, it is found in a pipe, probably an ancient volcanic channel, that goes down no one knows how deep."

"I see," said Frances.

"All the men here are practically prisoners," went on Braxton; "but they're mostly willing prisoners. They don't have to work hard and they live far better than they ever did in their lives before they were brought here. They have their families with them and they have the promise that some day they may go back, if they wish. Some few have insisted on going, and have ostensibly been allowed to do so."

"Ostensibly?"

"Yes; I've got my doubts as to their being allowed to reach the coast. Don Sabas doesn't strike me as a man who would take chances or who cares a fig for the life of a native. You know the dangers of reaching here? Well, it's easy to multiply them when occasion demands."

"You think he murdered the men he's pretended to let go away?" Frances was horrified.

"I wouldn't put it past him; most of the time he is smooth and courteous, but sometimes he drops the mask and shows an insane lurking devil within. He's always been good to me, but I suspect it's because he knows he's got me and because he's glad to have a civilized man to talk to up here. He has to be here a good deal and he has no one to associate with since his two partners were killed by the White Death. He'd snuff me out in a minute if his interests demanded. Sometimes, of late, I've even wondered—— However, that doesn't matter just now. I've been thinking, and I believe I know who your Geoff is. I think he must be John Geoffrey Barnett, owner of the *Pathfinder*."

"Father!"

"I think so; your description fits; and Mr. Rafferty told you he was down here somewhere. He's a friend of mine, you know, and before I started up-river I wrote him a letter, telling him what I was going to try to do. Oh, yes; I guess it's he, all right."

Frances' eyes had grown rounder and rounder. "Oh, it must be he," she gasped; "it must be. That's why he was looking for Mr. Rafferty to follow him."

"Rafferty?"

"Yes." Frances explained about the cross and the note beneath it. "I can't understand it all yet," she finished. "I can't see how he expected Mr. Rafferty to pass us; but he did expect him, and he wouldn't have expected him unless he had employed him. Oh, yes, father; you're right. Geoff is Mr. Barnett. Oh, if he's dead, I'll—I'll——"

"Nonsense; he isn't dead. Maybe he'll wish he was when I get a chance at him. The idea of his daring to make love to my baby girl."

Frances smiled through her tears. "He hasn't been making love exactly, father," she began; "he——"

"Oh, not exactly, eh? Well, well!" Mr. Braxton contemplated his daughter with new eyes. "I never realized that you were grown up before, Frances," he said, "and in those trousers——"

Frances blushed. "If you saw the fashions at home, father," she exclaimed, "you'd know how very modest these—er—garments are in comparison. I simply had to wear them."

"Oh, of course; you did quite right. Eh, what's that?"

The Indian boy had come to Braxton's side and was plucking at his sleeve. When Braxton turned, the boy pointed at the sky and spoke swiftly in his own tongue.

Braxton stared in the direction indicated; then he shook his head and asked a question or two, which the boy answered vehemently. At last he turned around to the others.

"Look up yonder," he directed; "yonder, to the right of that long, queer-shaped cloud. Do you see anything?"

Frances looked long and hard. "I see something that looks like a bird," she said at last. "I can just make it out."

"So can I; the boy here thinks it's something extraordinary. He says it's a bird that's bigger than a hundred condors and that it's been hovering over the crater for four days. Generally it stays high up, but sometimes it comes low enough for its voice to be heard. It isn't like anything anybody here ever saw before. He says that there's a trail of smoke behind it, and he wants to know whether I think its coming has anything to do with the volcano."

"A trail of smoke?" Frances looked incredulous. "I can't be sure I see the thing itself," she protested, "much less any smoke."

"The boy can; at least, he sees something queer," Braxton spoke emphatically. "These Indians beat a hawk for seeing things. I don't know what he sees, and of course

it isn't smoke, but the thing is certainly unusual. What do you think about it, professor?"

The professor grinned. "I think you'd better not tell Don Sabas about it," he observed, "unless you want to frighten him to death. We felt a slight shock of earthquake to-day and it scared him out of his wits. He thought the earth was trembling to carry out the conditions of his—er—horoscope. If he sees a bird that breathes smoke he'll go quite mad."

"Good Lord!" Braxton's face darkened. "I forgot. Of course it would scare him; he believes that horoscope idiocy through and through. The earthquake and the fire-bird would seem like the writing on the wall to him. He'll be frantic."

Braxton spoke gravely; evidently the prospect did not please him. "I'm sorry," he added.

"So am I," Frances nodded gravely. "I have been hoping to get us all free by working on his fear of the consequences if he kept us prisoners; but of course I've been counting on a normal man to deal with. You can't frighten a man who is already desperate with fear. I'm a little frightened myself. I didn't like his expression when he spoke of a talisman that would save him if everything else went wrong. He looked—well, he did not look pretty when he said it. No, father; I'd just as soon not frighten Don Sabas too badly."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN.

THE day dawned dark and ominous. Frances, rousing early despite the fatigues of the day before, grew frightened at the strange, sulphury look and taste of the air, and hurried up to the roof, where she found her father awake and watching.

Gravely he welcomed her. "Come here, little girl," he called. "I'm afraid you've come to Humachumac at a bad time. Look yonder." He pointed at the cone.

Frances looked. "Are we going to have an eruption?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so; probably there isn't much danger yet, but it's coming. I believe the people think so. The men have refused to go to work. See how they're buzzing."

On the ground below groups of men and women were talking, it sounding like the buzzing of angry bees.

Professor Meekerton had come up behind Frances and had been listening to Braxton's last words. Promptly he nodded. "Beyond a doubt that would be the ordinary course of events," he agreed; "but, as you suggest, it is not possible to predict with certainty as to volcanoes. Er—have you see Don Sabas to-day?"

Braxton glanced about. "Yonder he comes now," he answered.

It was as Braxton stated.

The Spanish American had come out of the door of the great stone building across the creek and was stopping to fasten the door behind him.

"He sleeps in that building," explained Braxton. "It's an old building without any windows on the ground floor. He's put up an iron door and he always keeps it tightly locked. I don't know what for, unless he's afraid the White Death will get in, for no Indian would dare to cross the river."

Don Sabas had come down to the side of the river and was letting down a drawbridge. When he had crossed on it he drew it up again. "He never leaves that bridge down," remarked Braxton; "it can be worked from either side, so it's not to keep men from crossing. Maybe it really is to keep the White Death from crossing the stream. He looks pretty badly, doesn't he?"

"The fire-bird!" they cried.

Braxton was right; Don Sabas did look badly. A moment later he began to speak.

In a low voice Braxton translated. "He's telling them that there's no danger yet," he said; "he's saying that he has power to quiet the volcano—has some sort of talisman that will do the trick. He's promising them that if he can't do it he'll let them go soon."

"A talisman? What does he refer to?" A nameless foreboding oppressed the girl's spirits.

"God knows, he's promising a lot. There, the priest is speaking. He's reminding Don Sabas of his horoscope and telling him of the smoke-bird. Hello, that seems to be news to Don Sabas. It took the rest of the spunk right out of him. Listen, hear his voice running up the gamut. He's frightened out of his wits. That's the trouble with charms and talismans and things like that. They're all right when they're all right, but when they slump they slump to nothing. He's—— Hello!"

With one accord the crowd had turned and raised their faces to the roof. Frances felt the impact of their eyes almost as if it had been physical. With a gasp she shrank back.

Braxton stepped in front of her and glared back; then he spoke over his shoulder. "Don Sabas is coming in," he said swiftly. "I didn't catch what he said, and I don't know what he's up to; but he's coming and bringing the crowd with him."

Don Sabas came swiftly. Almost before Braxton had announced his coming he and his followers came rushing up the stone steps and crowded through the opening, onto the roof.

Don Sabas' disorder had been apparent enough from a distance, but it was absolutely unmistakable close at hand. His swarthy face was livid with fear, and his eyes glared insanely from sunken sockets. Courtesy was second nature to him and he did not altogether lose it, so far as outward forms went; but his voice ran raucous and his whole manner showed that he was in deadly earnest. His followers, too, were plainly roused to the last pitch of terror and excitement. Grouped together at the opening, snarling like wild beasts, they murmured together.

Don Sabas addressed himself to Frances. "Señorita," he panted, "behold me a suppliant at your feet. I offer to you my heart and my hand. No, do not turn away, señorita; pardon this bluntness and listen to me, I beseech you. I had not meant to woo you thus; I had looked forward to long evenings in the silver moonlight when I would teach you to love me. I had planned many things for you and yours; but time presses and I beseech you to marry me now, this very hour. No, no; do not say me nay, señorita." The man's voice rose almost to a scream, but he forced it back. "I am rich, señorita, the wealth of Crœsus is mine. For years I have dug the diamonds from the earth and have stored away their value. I own millions upon millions. I can give you anything, anything —even liberty for yourself and your father and your friends. Only be my wife, and I——"

Frances broke in at last. For the moment she had been stunned by the torrent of words. "Please, please, Don Sabas," she begged, "please, I cannot, I cannot."

"Why not, señorita, why not? I am young, not ugly, Castilian born. My fathers helped to rule Spain in days gone by. Give me the chance and I will show you how a cavalier can love."

Again the girl broke in. "Please don't," she begged; "it is impossible."

Don Sabas' breath came quicker. Desperately he turned to Braxton. "Speak for me, Señor Braxton," he begged; "you know what I am, you know that always I have treated you kindly, you know that what I have done I did because I had to. No man of sense would have done otherwise and would have cast away the fortune to gain which he had nearly perished. Speak for me. I will set you and the professor free; I will give you millions—all that you want. I swear it by the grave of my mother. Only speak to the señorita that she become my wife."

Braxton shook his head; he was wondering what could be the cause of this mad pleading. Not for one moment did he believe that it was spontaneous. It had come too abruptly for that. In some way, he was sure, it was associated with the physical phenomena that was occurring in the crater. But how?

"My daughter and I are deeply conscious of the honor you do us," he declared ceremoniously. "Greatly we regret to be obliged to refuse; but——"

"To refuse! To refuse! You dare to refuse?"

The three moved uncomfortably. They could not forget that they were in Don Sabas' power nor that he was half mad or perhaps wholly mad with fear. The proposal must be refused, of course, but it must be refused with great care.

"I beg you to believe," began Braxton, "that——"

"Silence, pig of an American." Don Sabas' teeth snapped on the last word; then he whirled on Frances. "Señorita, I beg, for the last time I implore you to hear me. I cannot wait; I must——"

Frances had recovered herself; her cheeks were pale, but her eyes were bright. "I'm sorry, Don Sabas," she said definitively; "I cannot marry you."

"But you must marry me." The man's voice rose to a scream. "You shall marry me! Por dios, señorita, am I to be played with? You shall marry me within the hour, or—or I'll kill your father and your friend and take you without the aid of the priest. You shall marry me, do you hear, señorita?"

"Stop!" Frances flung up her head. "Stop; listen to me! You think we are in your power; but we are not. You are in ours. Do you think Professor Meekerton and I were so simple as to come up here without due precautions? Not one step have we taken without forethought. Throughout we have been watched by consuls and by detectives and by American gunboats. All our plans have been written down and placed in safe hands. If we do not come back in good time you—yes, you—will have to answer for our safety. The moment you put foot on the coast without us you will be arrested. We sent letters by safe hands from Curilla, telling of your sudden conversion to our search. We did not suspect you then, but we took precautions. We are not hapless wanderers. We are people of consequences in our own land. Professor Meekerton is known all over the world. If you harm a hair of our heads, if you dare to hold us prisoners for a minute longer than we are willing to stay you will have to answer for it to the United States and to your own country. Now go, and do not come back."

The girl's voice rang strong and vehement. At her first words Don Sabas blanched, but as she went on he straightened up and his eyes began to gleam evilly.

"Bueno!" he broke in as she finished. "Bueno; you have trapped me, have you? You have spied on me, have you? And you tell me of it, not thinking that you give me all the more reason that I marry you. Greatly careful will you be to protect me from this, your snare, when you are my wife. You will marry me, señorita, within the hour."

Frances gasped; she had shot her bolt and it had recoiled upon her. A chill of fear swept over her; then swiftly she rallied. The game was not played out. She still had woman's weapons at her command.

Swiftly she stepped forward and laid her hand deliberately on the arm of the frantic man. "Now, Don Sabas," she said with an utter change of tone, "drop all this and tell me what's the matter. Tell me why you want to marry me, and maybe we can find some way out. You don't really love me. I'm sure of that. You don't want to marry me just for myself."

Don Sabas shook off the girl's hand. "No!" he raved. "No; I want not to marry you for yourself; but marry you I will. Know you not what has happened?" He waved his arm about him. "The earth has quivered beneath my feet and the air has bred fire-birds above my head. My doom is at hand, unless I use the last escape offered to me and wed with a fair-faced maiden with blue eyes and yellow hair. If I do this I shall live long. If I do not then I die."

"Good gracious," Frances gasped with amazement, "are you insane? You can't really believe that nonsense."

"I believe it so much that I marry you within the hour." Deadly calmness descended suddenly upon the Spanish-American. "Within the hour—look you, señorita, and you, señors, it marks eight of the clock—I go; but at nine I return. Make no mistake; when I return it shall be as I have said. Think you I will let the so foolish whim of a girl destroy me and my valley and these, my people here?" He waved his hand to the watching throng. "Not so, señorita; when I come back you will marry me or—— But there will be no 'or,' señorita. You will marry me. Adios, señorita; adios, señors."

He spun upon the crowd behind him. "Keep guard," he ordered in the native tongue. "Keep guard; let no one leave. Your lives, all our lives, depend on it. In one hour I will return. "Keep guard." He darted through the opening and raced down the steps.

The three looked at each other blankly as Don Sabas rushed away. No one spoke; no one knew what to say. Frances stood tense, staring into the lowering sky. The professor gazed meditatively at the guards that surrounded the doorway in the roof. Braxton's face grew darker and darker.

Then suddenly Frances cried out. "See, see!" she screamed, pointing. "See!"

In the upper heavens a great shape was whirling, rising and falling and circling on wide-spread wings. Bird-like it was, but huger far than any bird that mortal had ever seen.

From the guarding crowd arose a moan. "The fire-bird!" they cried. "The fire-bird!"

But on Frances realization rushed. "It's an aeroplane,"

she cried. "It's Mr. Rafferty in an aeroplane. That was what Geoff meant in his note. That's how he expected him to pass us. It's Mr. Rafferty. He's found Geoff already; I know he has, I know he has, and they're looking for us. Here, here!" the girl's voice rose in a scream. "Here we are! Here, here!"

Rafferty, if it was indeed Rafferty, seemed to see or hear. The aeroplane came around in a mighty curve and shot downward.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ON the roof the three adventurers stood gazing upward, stretching their hands to the coming succor. The Indian guards, panic-stricken, shrank back, crying out inarticulately as the big aeroplane shot downward.

Then, without warning, a change came. With a roar, a huge column of smoke shot upward from the cone, blotting out the sun and enveloping and hiding the aeroplane. Through the ancient building a tremor ran, increasing swiftly till the walls and floors shook as if in the grip of a giant hand. Instinctively Braxton caught his daughter in his arms. "Come, quick!" he ordered. "Before the building falls." He urged her toward the doorway.

But the girl held back. "The aeroplane!" she gasped.

"We can't wait to see. God, hear the walls grinding! Come, quick!"

Frances was still staring upward, straining her eyes through the murk, hoping to see the aeroplane come shooting downward; but it did not come, and at last she yielded and raced with her father and the professor for the exit.

There was no opposition from the guards. At the first quiver they had fled, crying, "Templor! Templor!" The three friends could hear them rushing down the stairs amid the tumult of cracking stones and falling plaster.

The movement lasted for a moment only. As the three hurried through the lower doorway out onto the ground, in the wake of the crowd of fugitives, it died away.

Frances would have paused, but Braxton and the professor hurried her on. "Get into the open," Braxton kept entreating. "It's the only safe place. Get into the open." He dragged his daughter forward, stopping only when well away from the building. The Indians had scattered, forgetful of their prisoners and thinking only of themselves.

Well into the open Braxton stopped and the three looked back at the building; then, seeing that it still stood, they turned their eyes to the volcanic cone, from which the smoke, visibly thicker than before, was ascending in puffs instead of in the customary smooth ribbon.

The professor looked at it and nodded. "Ah!" he observed; "I thought so. The oscillations are not over. They have paused for a moment only. If I mistake not, we are about to witness a natural phenomenon of considerable interest—no less than a sudden flare-up of volcanic activity, accompanied by an earthquake far more powerful than the mild one we have just experienced. The fact that the smoke comes in puffs shows that its egress from the cone is obstructed and that the pressure of the gaseous forces is accumulating. When they grow too strong they——"

Frances seized him by the arm. "Look! Look!" she cried.

Over the sky had come a sudden change. All in an instant it had turned hazen, every scrap of blue being blotted out. Half of it was a vast copper-colored vault, in which the sun glowed dimly. The other half was filled with blood-red haze, through and across which, immeasurably high, the aeroplane was reeling like a tempest-tossed bird. As Frances pointed upward there came a roar and a vast shaft of black smoke flowed from the cone and shot upward to the zenith. In it the aeroplane vanished again. Simultaneously came the lightning; flash upon flash forked downward and peal after peal of thunder bellowed in crashing pandemonium.

Quickly followed the earthquake that the professor had presaged. The belabored earth heaved in agony, circling dizzily and flinging the three friends to the ground. Through the turmoil they saw the great building they had just left rock on its ancient foundations, totter, and crash down in tremendous ruin. Then the wind rose, whirling the smoke of the volcano across the sun, blotting out the glare into an unearthly twilight.

The paroxysm lasted for a few seconds only. As quickly as it had come it passed away, leaving ruin in its wake.

Frances and Braxton scrambled to their feet, shaken, bruised and dizzy, but not seriously injured; but the professor lay still.

Frances limped to his side and bent down to find him smiling at her. "My leg's gone," he murmured pluckily. "This is the end. No matter, I've had a good run for it. If I could only have solved the White Death I'd be content. Good-by, Frances; you and Braxton must save yourselves."

"Save ourselves?"

"Yes; I'm done for. You must go at once. You can't stay here. Good-by."

Frances looked about her. Clearly the partial escape of the three was only a respite and not a deliverance. All about her ashes and scoria, tossed upward from the cone, were pattering down. While she stared a huge bomb, larger than a man, crashed at a distance, splintering itself to fragments. Overhead the black cloud began to glow luridly, as fitful flames flared up and died down from the flickering candle of the cone. A snarling, like that of wolves, filled the air.

Refuge there seemed none. Every building near at hand was a mass of tumbled fragments on which the débris from the cone was pattering. Through the wrecked fields flames were springing up, against which here and there were silhouetted the forms of running men. Far to the north, toward the mouth of the gorge, a pillar of flames was streaming upward, showing that the internal fires had found another vent.

Only to the east, beyond the river, in the domain of the White Death, did the land seem clear, and in this direction Frances' and Braxton's eyes turned instinctively. Then they looked back at each other.

"It's the only chance," exclaimed Braxton.

Frances nodded. "Can I help?" she asked.

Braxton shook his head. "Oh, no," he answered; then he bent down and slipped his arm beneath the professor's slight frame. "Set your teeth, professor," he said. "This is going to hurt."

The professor tried to draw back. "No, no!" he protested. "Save yourselves; I'm dying. I'm old enough to die. Don't hamper yourselves." A spasm of pain crossed his face and his head fell back on Braxton's shoulder.

Braxton scrambled heavily to his feet; he himself was not young. "He's fainted!" he said. "Thank God, he won't suffer!" Staggeringly he took his way to the river.

The distance was not great and was soon traversed. Luckily the drawbridge was down, torn from its fastenings by the force of the earthquake. Across it the three scurried.

Then they stopped; before them rose the old laboratory building, the building in which Don Sabas slept. Apparently the earthquake had spared it.

Frances gesticulated toward it. "Go in, go in!" she cried.

Braxton glanced back at the cone. "We can't stop!" he panted. "We can't stop!"

"We must stop; you can't carry the professor much farther. We'll wait for Geoff here."

"For Geoff?"

"Yes; he'll save us. I know it." She turned toward the building. "Where is the door?" she asked.

"There, before you; I pray heaven it's open. Yes, it is! The earthquake has burst it."

The earthquake had burst more than the door. As Frances came closer she saw that it had wrecked the walls as it had wrecked those of the larger building, tearing gaps in them and whirling great blocks of stone from the roof to the ground. It had not, however, flung down the whole in a mass of ruin. Enough remained to afford

protection from the rain of projectiles that the cone was flinging upward and outward.

Once under shelter, Braxton let the professor slip from his arms to the ground. As he did so the old man's eyes opened. "Good boy," he muttered; "good boy and brave girl. You ought not have trouble about an old man like me." He raised his head and peered out. "Lift me up, please," he said; "lean me against something, so I can see the eruption. I have always wanted to see one and I can't afford to miss this."

Without a word Braxton lifted the old man and propped him against the wall of the building.

Great drops of sweat stood on the professor's brow, but he went on pluckily. "Such a shock as this," he said, "is, of course, volcanic and purely local and cannot be compared with the great tectonic shocks. Still, it is decidedly interesting and extremely violent within its limited area of disturbance. I am glad that I have witnessed it. Er—have you a note-book, Frances? I should like to record my observations of the phenomena preceding the actual shock and to add certain impressions I have formed."

But Frances shook her head. "I am sorry," she breathed; "I haven't any note-book."

"Ah, well, no matter; no matter. It is unfortunate; but no matter. If I could only solve the White Death," he muttered; "if I could——" Abruptly his eyes flew wide. "Braxton, Braxton," he rasped, "what are you standing there for? Have you forgotten that this building may house the secret of the White Death? Go and find out; go, sir; go quickly."

Braxton looked at Frances and the girl nodded. "Yes, go, father," she said, "it will please him. And it really doesn't matter now, does it?"

Braxton raised his eyes to the cone, down whose side a white line was stealing. "No," he said; "it doesn't matter now." He turned and hurried into the recesses of the building.

The professor babbled on; for most of the time he clearly forgot where he was, but now and then he came abruptly back to realization.

Frances crouched beside him, watching the lava stream increase and spread over the floor of the crater. For the moment it did not come toward the river, but she knew that its coming was only a question of time. Vainly, too, she searched the sky, only to drop her eyes despairingly when she saw no trace of the aeroplane.

In one of his brief moments of full consciousness the professor caught sight of the lava. "Ah," he exclaimed, "lava! You see, my dear Frances, the orifice has gotten rid of the matter that was obstructing it, just as a man clears his throat by means of a violent sneeze. The lava will probably flow gently till another obstruction occurs. Then the cone will probably blow up. If the obstruction becomes too widespread the whole crater will disintegrate and become in an instant a mass of seething flame. It will be very interesting, very interesting." As often before, the professor had forgotten the human side of the question.

Frances did not answer; she needed all her strength to keep from breaking down completely.

When Braxton returned; Frances heard his footsteps scurrying behind her and turned and saw him running, panting as he ran.

"Frances!" he gasped. "Frances! Professor!" He stumbled to their side.

So strange was his expression and so full of excitement was his voice than neither of the others spoke. Breathlessly they waited till he got back his voice.

"I've found it," he gasped; "I've found the secret of the White Death."

Promptly the professor stretched up his arms. "Take me!" he begged. "I want to see."

Braxton was already stooping to lift the old man in his arms. A moment later he rose to his feet, holding him. "That's what I came for, professor," he said. "You've earned the right to see all there is to be seen. Come, Frances."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

FOLLOWED by Frances and bearing the professor in his arms, Braxton strode into the recesses of the building. Through room after room he passed, and down long dim halls that would have been black as midnight had it not been for the rents torn in the walls by the earthquake. Once he looked back. "Another shock will bring these walls down," he observed grimly. "Under other conditions I wouldn't come near them; but it doesn't matter now. Nothing matters any more."

Frances nodded; she also was convinced that the end was at hand. Silently she followed till Braxton stepped through a doorway. "Here we are," he said as he stepped forward.

The room, or rather rotunda, was huge and lofty. That it had once had a roof was probable from the line of mouldering dust that seemed to show where wooden rafters had fallen to the floor and had rotted away to nothingness. The windowless walls were still intact, and around them, tier after tier, each in a niche of stone, were ranged hundreds of the great silvery cocoons that were associated with the White Death, each perfect, untorn by the rocks which had rent those that had floated down to the sea. Round each lay a collection of weapons, of platters, drinking-cups, jewels, and all the other things to which its inmate had supposedly been accustomed in life—such things as primitive people the world over bury with their dead. Once the first shock of the discovery was over, none of the three needed any explanation to tell them that they had found the mortuary vault in which the ancient dwellers in the crater—the builders of the great stone houses—had hidden away their dead.

Silently Braxton bore the professor to the middle of the room and laid him against a stone that had probably once served as an altar.

The old man looked about him and nodded. "Very interesting," he observed; "very interesting. Evidently the so-called victims of the White Death are really only mummies prepared hundreds of years ago by priests of the ancient cult. You will remember, Frances, that the finding of an opening in the side of the body discovered at Curilla suggested this to me. The silken sheath was woven by human hands and was smeared with a corrosive poison to preserve it and the bodies it enwrapped from animal and vegetable attacks. We have yet to discover, however, the origin or source of the hollow filaments which were used in weaving the sheath."

Frances had made her way to the professor's side; now she drew down her brows. "I don't understand," she said; "Don Sabas said that the body at Curilla was that of one of his men."

"Humph!" The professor's answer came low, but cheerful. "Maybe Don Sabas lied," he suggested.

Frances hesitated. "Perhaps," she agreed at last, "he may have wanted an excuse to join us."

"No doubt he did," Braxton interposed. All seemed to have forgotten or decided to ignore the volcano. "But I have been thinking; bodies wrapped in the silken sheath have undoubtedly been found, both in the water and on the land, that were those of men who had been living only a short time ago. It looks to me very much as if Don Sabas had systematically murdered any native that became obnoxious, wrapped him in a sheath taken from a mummy, and thrust him out to be found. It worked both ways, you see. It kept the natives obedient and kept unwelcome visitors away from the region."

"But Professor Kleinschmidt?"

Braxton hesitated. "Kleinschmidt was really here, I believe," he said at last; "but I'm guessing that the rest of the story is a fable. Most of it is, anyway. I guess Kleinschmidt did try to evolve some sort of venomous thing. For a while I actually thought that he had succeeded in breeding a hugé tarantula, big as a horse; all foolishness, of course. When Kleinschmidt died, or was killed, it must have occurred to Don Sabas to utilize his notes. He's cunning, is Don Sabas, and he could see a very satisfactory profit in controlling a mysterious mode of

death like the White Death. Oh, yes; I'm beginning to understand now. The whole thing is opening out. You know that Don Sabas had two partners when he found these mines; but they both died by the White Death. Don Sabas is now the sole owner of the diamonds. Oh, yes; it was very convenient, very convenient. That explains everything."

"Perhaps"—Frances hesitated—"perhaps; but I'm not so sure. You think then that there is no White Death really, no creature that——"

"Of course not; it's all a fake. It's a pretty big fake, of course, and it's an amazing one, too; but, of course, you must remember that Don Sabas isn't altogether sane. Maybe he never has been really sane. That horoscope nonsense shows that he's got a kink in his brain, and this business proves it. Why, he must have murdered scores of people, including his own partner. Can you imagine a sane man swathing the bodies of his victims in these silken sheaths, or can you imagine a man staying sane after he'd done such a thing a few times?"

Frances shook her head. "I guess you're right, father," she said; "but still——"

A choking cry or rather a sob from Professor Meekerton interrupted her, and she turned.

The old man was clutching at his throat. "Good-by," he panted; "good-by, Braxton. Good-by, Frances dear. I'm—I'm going now; I've done my work. I've nothing more to live for. Good-by." His eyes closed; he drew his breath gaspingly; then he lay very still.

Frances and her father bent hurriedly downward. After a moment they raised their eyes. "He's gone," sobbed the girl.

"Yes, he's gone. Don't grieve, Frances. He's escaped suffering that we will probably have to undergo. Come, we must try to escape."

"And leave him here?"

"Why not? No place would please him better; come." The girl rose and the two made their way across the littered floor to the doorway; but as they reached it the door clanged shut in their very faces.

Instantly Braxton flung himself against it, striving to burst it open; but it did not give way.

As he drew back for a fresh assault something clicked above his head and a grating in the door opened. Through it came Don Sabas' voice, shrill with fear.

"Listen!" he cried, his voice rising to a shriek. "Listen, señorita. Doom is upon us all, upon us all, and you only can save us. Say you will marry me. Say it, for the sake of the good God. Say it."

So wild were the man's tones and words that Frances could scarcely believe him serious. "I won't," she answered indignantly. "Once for all, Don Sabas, I won't; understand that once for all."

"Then we will all die—all. Know you what is happening? The earth is vomiting lava and is growing hot beneath the feet. My people are fleeing in terror to the gorge. Behind them comes the red-hot lava, licking up the earth as it moves. You, and you only, can stop its march. Marry me and I will stand before it and drive it back and save the valley and the so beautiful diamonds—millions of them, señorita; millions, and all for you. You shall rival queens. Señorita, for the love of God, say that you will marry me and save them and me. Por Dios, señorita, I cannot die thus. I cannot die thus."

Frances shivered. "Listen to me, Don Sabas," she pleaded. "Believe me, I have no such power as you think. That lying soothsayer deceived you. My marrying you would have no effect on the volcano or the lava. If God wills that this crater again be filled with molten fire nothing that you or I do will stop Him. We can only flee before the manifestation of His wrath. Release us, Don Sabas; release us, and give us a chance for our lives. Release us, I beg, I implore."

"I will not; I will not—not unless you will marry me."

Frances glanced around despairingly; the heat had increased till it was terrific. She looked at her father. What right had she to doom him?

"You have no priest," she faltered.

"Yes, yes; the priest waits outside. I can get him very quickly. For heaven's sake, señorita, delay not."

Braxton stepped forward. "You shan't do this thing, Frances; the man's a murderer, and he's probably a madman."

The girl's face was like marble. "Yes, he's mad," she agreed; "but he holds us in his power. I'll do it." She turned toward the door. "Don Sabas," she called, "release us and I will marry you."

"Good; I go for Father Francisco." The cover over the grating clicked and Don Sabas' voice ceased.

Instantly Frances sprang forward. "Stop!" she cried. "Stop! Let us out first. Stop, I say!"

No answer came; probably Don Sabas did not hear. Perhaps he merely did not intend to trust. Frances realized this and sank down on the altar in a hysteria of mingled laughter and sobs.

"Oh, its too preposterous," she cried; "it's too utterably and absolutely incredible. This is the twentieth century. People don't do such things nowadays."

"People don't do the things we know they've done, either," returned her father disgustedly; "that is, some people don't. As I said just now, Don Sabas isn't sane. His wanting to marry you shows——"

"Shows what?" Frances was laughing; overstrained nerves reacted at last. The dread of death had suddenly left the girl; it might and probably would return, but for the moment the whole situation seemed to her incredible, like a story in a book.

Braxton broke off, staring; then he laughed reluctantly. "Oh, well, joke if you like," he remarked; "but it's no joking matter. We're in the power of a madman."

"I'm not so sure that we're in his power." Frances had been lying back on the slanting débris on which she had seated herself, scanning the sky as she had scarcely ceased doing since she had first spied the aeroplane. Now she sprang to her feet and pointed upward.

"See!" she cried. "There they are. I knew Geoff would come."

Across the opening where the roof had been the aeroplane was winging its way swiftly. It was lower down than before, low enough to make its nature indubitable to the prisoners.

Frances certainly was in no doubt. "Wave to them," she cried. "Wave to them, wave to them. Shout!" Suiting the action to the word, she herself loosed an ear-piercing scream that ought to have carried to the moon. Braxton, too, joined in with a mighty shout.

Apparently, however, they were unheard. Without change of speed the aeroplane sped on. A moment more and it passed out of sight across the edge of the wall.

Frances did not give up. "They'll be back," she cried. "I know they'll be back; they're searching for us, and they'll come back. We must be ready to wave when they come."

Braxton shrugged his shoulders. "Waving's no use," he declared. "They can't possibly see any one waving at the bottom of this well—not possibly. We're in the shade of the walls and we're absolutely invisible. We've got to make a fire."

"All right." Frances looked about her. "What can we burn?"

The question was difficult to answer. The building was of stone; what wood there had been had long since crumbled away to dust. Frances wrung her hands in despair.

Then suddenly an idea came to her. She sprang to the side of the professor's body and slipped her hands into his pocket. An instant later she drew out his rubber gloves.

Braxton watched her curiously. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

But Frances was over by the wall, with the gloves on her hands; before her father could finish, with desperate haste, she lifted one of the cocoons from its niche and bore it out into the hall. "Give me a match, father, quick," she ordered. "It's just a chance; but——" She struck the match and applied the flame to the edge of the cocoon.

Instantly it flamed up torch-like, and the girl sprang back. "I thought so," she cried; "I read once somewhere that mummies had been burned for fuel in Egypt. I guess it wasn't true, but it gave me an idea."

Quickly the flame burned itself out. Almost in a moment it died down, smouldered for a little while, then died altogether.

But Frances did not stop. Already she was back at the wall, bringing out another cocoon. "One isn't enough," she cried; "even if they see it they won't know that it's a signal nor who is burning it. We must make something that they'll recognize. We must make a cross, like the one Geoff made at the basin."

Braxton had caught on; he jumped to his daughter's side. "Give me those gloves," he ordered. A moment later he was laying the mummies in the shape of a rough cross.

"Now we're ready!" he cried at last.

Frances glanced around. "Don Sabas will be back in a moment," she gasped; "he may bring his men. We must bar them out." She scrambled toward the door and flung into place the great iron bar.

Simultaneously Braxton cried out. "There's the airship!" he yelled. "There she is!"

Frances looked up. Across the line of the roof the aeroplane was driving, lower than before. "Light them, father!" she shrieked. "Light them!"

Braxton obeyed. Match after match he struck and applied to the cocoon. Behind him flamed the fiery cross.

At the door came a sudden hammering, and the cover of the grating slid back. Don Sabas' voice sounded. "Quick, señorita!" he called. "Open the door. The priest is here. Quick, for the love of God!"

Frances paid no attention. Her eyes were fixed upon the sky. "They see us! They see us!" she shrieked. "They're coming down."

Down came the aeroplane, down, down, till it seemed about to dive into the pit. Frances could see the head of a man projected far out silhouette-like against the sky. From where she was he was only an outline, but she knew him. "Geoff! Geoff! Oh, Geoff!" she shrieked. Then the swooping aeroplane flashed across the crest of the wall and disappeared.

In incontrollable excitement Braxton swore aloud. "They'll never get us out," he cried. "They never can."

"Yes; they will, father. Geoff 'll do it. I know he will."

Don Sabas was hammering at the door, crying to the girl, begging and pleading. Frances heeded him not a whit. Probably she did not hear him; her mind had followed her eyes skyward.

"He'll be back in a minute, father," she chanted. "He'll be back, you'll see."

Back he was; over the top of the walls against the skyline two heads projected. The mummies had smouldered out and the bottom of the pit was full of shadows. "Frances!" called a voice. "Frances!"

"Yes, yes, Geoff! Yes, yes!"

"Thank God! Watch; I'm throwing down a rope." A rope uncoiled itself through the air and hung dangling against the wall. "Get inside the loop," called Geoff again, "and we'll pull you up. Help yourself all you can against the walls. Are you ready?"

Frances had pulled the loop over her shoulders. "Ready!" she called. "Pull away."

Quickly the two obeyed, and Frances shot upward. Don Sabas, gazing through the grating, saw her ascend and shrieked an imprecation. Then abruptly he became silent.

Frances neither heard nor heeded; she was clasped in Geoff's arms.

How long she would have stayed in them is doubtful; but Rafferty interrupted. "Sure and it's myself that hates to be after disturbing you," he said; "but it's only the one rope we've got, at all, at all. If you'll give it to me I'll turn me back, and——"

Frances shrieked and tore herself free. "Take the rope," she panted. "Oh, how could I forget? Take it, quick!"

Rafferty took it, and in a moment more Braxton stood on the roof.

Small time was there for greetings.

"The professor?" breathed Geoff.

"Dead," said Braxton; "dead where he wanted to be, in the charnel-house of the White Death. We can only save ourselves."

"It's lucky, after all, so it is," muttered Rafferty, "for we can't seat but four. All aboard, quick! Sure it's high time."

It was indeed high time.

Roundabout, from a score of vents cracked in the black crust, tongues of flame licked upward, casting unearthly lurid lights. To the west, around the cone, a lake of white-hot lava boiled; from it a tongue crept slowly toward the river. Overhead hung a canopy of black clouds, bottomed with glimmering copper.

Frances glanced once at the scene, then climbed into the aeroplane; but as she went she turned to Geoff.

"Oh, the poor people!" she sobbed. "Can't we help them?"

"They have helped themselves. Most of them have gotten to the gorge by now. There are boats at the swamp end. Rafferty found them. Fasten yourself in, quick!"

The propeller beat the air and the aeroplane quivered and began to move. Along it ran, steadily gathering speed, then leaped into the air.

Rafferty was driving it. Geoff spoke. "We're going in the wrong direction, but we hadn't room to turn before we rose. If we get around safely we'll be out of the crater and across the swamp in two hours."

Round the machine circled in a great mounting curve that carried it back toward the building it had just left. As it passed above the entrance Frances leaned over and pointed downward. "Look, look!" she shrieked. "Oh, my God! Look!"

Don Sabas had rushed from the door and was gazing around, tossing up his arms despairingly.

White-faced and trembling, Frances hid her face on Geoff's shoulder. "Good-by to the White Death!" she sobbed. "The White Death—we've seen it."

Geoff, too, was white-faced. "Yes," he said, "the White Death; but it will trouble men no more. Look!"

Frances looked; far down, far beneath the still mounting airship, spread a lake of fire—fire, the purifier that had filled the crater and had blotted out all its abomination.

Two hours later the aeroplane had crossed the mountains and the swamp, and its passengers were safe on board the *Pathfinder*, homeward bound.

THE DEACON'S SIN

By JOHN HARBERTON, author of "Helen's Babies."

THE president and the general superintendent of the great and only Longstretch Railway Company, had been taking the president of the Crosscut Road over both lines, with a view to a possible consolidation, or a lease of the smaller road by the greater. They had given several days and nights to earnest talking, figuring and other trickery, so when they finally came to a basis of agreement, and dropped business from their minds, they were so weary that they felt the need of a change. Being solid business men, they could not enjoy even rest and recreation unless money was somehow at stake, so when one of them suggested a game of poker, the other two exclaimed, as with one voice:

"Good!"

They had a special car, great easy-chairs, a table big enough to hold their six elbows, chips that had cost their weight in silver, and money enough in their pockets to make a game without a limit. They were smoking cigars that cost a quarter apiece; there were some high-priced bottles on ice, and a man to open them, yet they did not seem entirely happy. Finally the Crosscut president remarked, as he carelessly fingered the cards:

"It's too bad that we haven't another man. Three are just too few for a really enjoyable game—one with enough excitement in it."

"Just what I was thinking," assented the Longstretch president. Then he turned toward the superintendent and said: "Pushett, you know everybody along our line. Don't you suppose that if you were to go through the train you could pick up the right man to take a fourth hand?"

"Quite possibly," replied the superintendent.

"Be very careful, please," said the other president. "Don't stumble upon a stockholder in my road, for if one of them should chance to get into the game and lose, he'd make some excuse to abuse me after the consolidation goes into effect."

He went to the barn to read and ponder the superintendent's communication.

"No commercial traveler, either," said the president, "nor any penny-limit man. You want to find a—a——"

"I know—I know," interrupted Pushett. "You want some one as discreet, clever and full of sand as a railway general superintendent."

"Just so! And we want him right away, Pushett. There's a lot of valuable time going to waste."

The official sauntered through the train, but found no one who would fully meet the requirements of so exacting a poker party. Worse still, he encountered old Deacon Rootsum, who for five years had nursed a grievance against the company—to wit, a horse killed by a train—and who had often dropped into the company's offices for a long talk on the subject. Pushett tried to ignore the old man, but the deacon was not rightly made for such treatment; he followed the superintendent through the car, button-holed him on the platform, and said:

"Don't shy at me, Mr. Pushett. I'll let the hoss business rest for to-day if you'll do somethin' for me. I s'pose you know the lightnin' spiled our church steeple a spell ago? We can get the lumber for a new steeple a good deal cheaper out West than at home—I've just been out there to see about it, but the freight is an item that frightens me. Now, the p'int I'm comin' to is this—your road carries the hull way from there to here; s'pose I give up the hoss claim, an' you offset the favor by freein' our steeple stuff through?"

"H'm! Where's the lumber to come from?"

"Indianny."

"Great Scott! The Interstate Commerce Law would make trouble for us, I'm afraid. Still, I'll speak to our president about it."

"When?"

"Right away. He's aboard this train. Sit down in the next car; I'll be back to you in five minutes."

"Sure?"

"Dead sure."

"What luck?" asked both presidents, as the superintendent suddenly reappeared.

"Not a bit—unless you'd like some fun with your game. Old Deacon Rootsum who's been worrying us for five years to pay for one of his old horses that was killed on the track—as he deserved to be, for getting on the track—is aboard, and wants a favor—wants us to balance the claim by free-hauling a lot of lumber from Indiana to build a new steeple for his church. He's on his way home from a trip to price the stuff."

"Has he any stuff in his pockets? That's the question."

said the Crosscut president. "It would be a new sensation to win some church money."

"Oh, he wouldn't bet. I don't suppose he knows one card from another. 'Twould be lots of fun, though, to teach a deacon to play poker. He needn't see any money. We can explain that the chips are merely to keep a record of the game, and we can divide his losses, whatever they may be."

"'Tisn't every day that a man gets a chance to play poker with a deacon," mused the Longstretch president.

"Fact," assented the other president. "Bring him in, Mr. Pushett."

"Deacon," said the superintendent, a moment or two later, "I think we may be able to talk that lumber matter to a head, if you'll humor the old man a little. The truth is that he's tired out, longing for a game of cards to rest him, and we need one more man to make up the party."

"But, Mr. Pushett, I don't know cards from cardamon seeds, though my boys and gals do play at home sometimes—for fun, of course. Besides, I'm a church member."

"Well, so's our president; he's way up in one of the biggest churches in the city. Of course you're not expected to bet or gamble, or do anything that's improper. Come along! Humor the old man, and you'll probably get what you want.'

"Well, I dunno, but——"

"Come along! Come along!"

Within five minutes the two presidents and the deacon were as chatty as if they had known one another for years, and the deacon was smoking a big rich cigar as unconcernedly as if it were a four-for-five stogy from the grocery-store of his village. It was not every day that he had a chance to smoke and talk with two railway presidents; he was no fool, so endeavored to improve the shining hour.

The superintendent shuffled the cards, and remarked:

"Deacon, this is a very simple game; it consists merely in matching, or doing better. These—er—counters,"—here he began assorting, stacking and dividing the chips,—"are to keep tally with, and to show, at the end of the game, whose judgment has been best. The first thing to look for, in the five cards dealt you, is a pair—that is, two ten-spots, two kings, or any two cards of equal value. It is better to find two pairs—better still to get three of a kind. After that come five cards of a single suit—hearts, spades, or what not, a sequence—for instance, a three, four, five, six and seven spot, and there are still better things which we often hear about but seldom see; I'll explain them to you, if you strike any. Throw back upon the table any cards you don't like, and ask the dealer for an equal number to replace them; in that way you may sometimes raise a pair to three of a kind, which is a first rate thing to have. You'll easily catch on to the facts of the game; the difficult thing is to judge the chances well after the draw. Each man records his opinion of the chances of his hand by the use of these ch—er—counters; a white counter signifies one, a red one five, and a blue one ten; the man whose counters cipher up most at the end of the game has displayed the best judgment."

"Well," said the deacon, "I don't see anythin' sinful in that."

"Of course not," replied one of the presidents, "or we wouldn't be in it."

"Cut for deal," said the other president, reshuffling and laying the pack on the table.

The first two or three hands developed nothing remarkable, except that the deacon declared a pair of kings just after the superintendent had shown three kings. The deacon joined in the laugh against him when his supposed pair proved to consist of a king and a knave. Said he: "Kings and knaves are so much alike, accordin' to all hist'ry of king countries, that I wasn't so far out after all, seein' I hain't got the hang of the cards yet."

The deacon soon proved beyond doubt that he knew nothing of the game, and that he was abundantly supplied with sand. He observed the other players closely, and anteed and raised when his turn came, just as the man at his right did, no matter what was or was not in his own hand. Although the principle of the jack-pot was carefully explained to him, he stayed in when he had nothing but queen high—an act which compelled a rest until a bottle could be opened.

"Try a glass of champagne, deacon?" asked the Longstretch president.

"Well, that depends. They do say that almost all champagne is made of cider. If yours is that kind, I don't mind tryin' a cupful, but if it's the foreign, grapey kind, I'm agin it on principle."

"I guess the steward had better make you a glass of lemonade, deacon," said the superintendent with a laugh. "By the way, when should that lumber of yours be brought on?"

"I wish I knew," was the reply. "All we've done yet is to price it. The stuff, an' the puttin' of it together, will come to about seven hundred dollars, and the job of raisin' the money will come principally on me; it makes me groan to think of it, for most of the folks in our church are poor an' the rest is mighty stingy."

"Just the crowd that ought to be in a church," said the president. "If they don't need to be saved, I don't know who does. It's your deal, Pushett."

Again there were several games containing no remarkable hands, although the deacon won three times in four.

"A fool for luck!" quoted the president, as the deacon left his seat during a deal and went to the window to look at a very fine field of wheat which the train was passing.

Only once, during the subsequent playing, did the deacon weaken. Either through good hands or the spirit of bluff, the betting became furious for a moment or two, so when the deacon's turn came to cover he called. He could declare only king high, but when he showed his cards the Crosscut president shouted:

"Holy smoke! You've got a flush!" As there was nothing better in sight, three large piles of chips were pushed over to the novice, who looked helpless and drawled:

"Well, I hope I'll get the hang of the thing in the course of time. If my young folks know the game, they must teach it to me, so that I won't make such a fool of myself next time I get into such good company."

The Longstretch president did not like the way things were going. Although the deacon was playing merely for fun, the president's pile of chips was decreasing in size. The deacon's home station was only about half an hour away; the president told himself that if he got a half-good hand within that time, he would bluff so savagely that he would freeze out all the others, particularly that lucky old greenhorn.

Finally the president's time came. He caught three sevens in the deal, drew to a king, and raised his hand to a full. The others, the deacon included, drew three cards each, so the chances were many to one that none of them had as good a hand as the president, who accordingly raised when his turn came, raised again, and still a third time, putting up so many chips each time, that the other president and the superintendent went out. The deacon thought his own hand pretty good; beside, he reasoned to himself, heaping up counters was a cheap and easy way of showing spirit. If the president wanted to win a lot,

why let him have his way; it might make him good-natured enough to free-freight that lumber through from Indianny, when the church became able to buy it.

So, after his opponent's seventh raise, the old man picked up all of his blue chips, dropped them one by one on the pile in front of him, saying:

"Ten—twenty—thirty—forty—fifty — sixty — eighty—call."

The president carefuly covered the raise, displayed his hand, and said:

"A full—three sevens and a pair of kings."

"That beats me," said the deacon pleasantly. "I've only got two pairs of twos. Now, about freightin' that——"

"What's that? What's that?" interrupted the Crosscut president. "Lay your cards upon the table—spread them out. Why, man alive, you've got four deuces—the best hand that's been made to-day. The board is yours."

"Sho!" said the deacon, with a frown. "Still, regardin' that lumber—"

"The church will have to pay the freight," growled the president. "I'm not going to have the Interstate Commerce Commission hauling me over the coals; the amount involved is too large."

"Sho!' again remarked the deacon; then he turned aside and muttered to himself, "I s'pose I deserve it, for takin' part in a fool game with a bad-tempered man. Mustn't forget my manners, though. Good-day, gentlemen."

"Cash in!" said the superintendent, as the deacon departed.

There was some rapid counting of chips and money; then the superintendent counted the deacon's chips, subtracted the original stock, and announced:

"The deacon is $720 ahead of the game."

"You don't mean to say that you're going to pay the money over to the old fool?" queried the president.

"You bet he shall be paid my share of the losses," said the other president. "You wouldn't go back on him just because he wasn't onto the game, would you?"

"But he daren't take it—he can't."

"Yes, he can, if Pushett puts it at him in the right way. If he doesn't take it, I'll threaten him with exposure, before his whole church, for gambling. I'm not going to lose my share of the fun of the thing; I've paid too dearly for it. Hurry up, Pushett; the train is slowing."

The superintendent arranged the money, wrote a short letter, and thrust all into a long envelope which he addressed. About as soon as the train stopped a shadow was cast upon the window screen of the president's car, and the deacon's voice, almost on a wailing key, was heard asking:

"Mebbe you can tell me of some other railroad man that I can ask about gettin' that lumber hauled east for less than reg'lar rates?"

"Ask the devil!" snarled the president of the Longstretch.

"Well, I s'pose that's 'bout right, for the devil does seem to be managin' all the railroads nowadays. Good-day."

"Deacon," shouted the superintendent, from the platform of the car, "see here a moment. Take this envelope—careful; don't let it drop under the wheels. There's some documents in it that may make your mind easier about that lumber matter. If they work things as you want them, stick to your word and send me a receipted bill for that infernal old horse of yours, won't you? Train's off; good-by."

After the deacon had "seen his folks" he went to the barn to read and ponder the superintendent's communication, the barn being the place where most farmers do their hardest thinking. As he opened the envelope and saw the greenbacks, he exclaimed:

"He's give me the wrong letter! Don't it beat all how cards does turn the head, even of as well-balanced a feller as Pushett? Wonder who all this money b'longs to? Can't do no harm to look at the name in the letter. Let's see—h'm—whew! May the Lord have mercy upon me, a sinner!"

The letter read as follows:

DEAR DEACON:—Our little poker game was for keeps; we hadn't meant to tell you, but when a man wins $720 at a game he doesn't understand, and doesn't know the difference between two pairs and four of a kind, he's manifestly one of heaven's fools and it wouldn't be safe to beat him out of his winnings.

There's enough enclosed to rebuild your steeple, if you'll risk so sacred a purpose to such sinful money; I'll leave you to find your own way of wriggling out of it before the church. By the way, the church will have to pay the freight on that lumber, and don't you dare to ship by any line but ours; if you do, I'll give you away in meeting. Don't let me ever hear another thing about that old horse of yours either.

Yours truly JONATHAN PUSHETT.

For two days the deacon did some hard thinking and praying; then he indited and mailed the following epistle:

DEAR MR. PUSHETT:—I'm glad your road has at last got honest enough to pay for my horse. I enclose receipt in full with the items; here it is:

One horse run over five years ago.....	$100
Five years' interest on above at 6 per cent.	30
Five years worry over above and worry all the rest of my life about the tricky way the bill was paid	590
	$720

Received payment, HEZEKIAH ROOTSUM.

HIGHEST DWELLING HOUSE IN THE WORLD

"The loftiest habitation in the world is in Peru," writes Isaiah Bowman in "The Andes of Southern Peru," published by the American Geographical Society. "Between Antabamba and Cothuasi occur the highest passes in the Maritime Cordillera. We crossed at 17,400 feet and 300 feet lower is the last outpost of the Indian shepherds. The snowline, very steeply canted away from the sun, is between 17,700 and 17,600 feet. At frequent intervals during the three months of winter snowfalls during the night and terrific hailstorms in the later afternoon drive both shepherds and flocks to the shelter of leeward slopes or steep canyon walls.

"The thatched stone hunt that we passed at 17,100 feet and that enjoys the distinction of being the highest in the world was in other respects the same as the thousands of others in the same region. It sheltered a family of five. As we passed three rosy-cheeked children almost as fat as the sheep about them were sitting on the ground in a corner of the corral playing with balls of wool. Hundreds of alpacas and sheep grazed on the hill slopes and valley floor, and their tracks showed plainly that they were frequently driven up to the snowline in those valleys where a trickle of water supported a band of pasture. Less than a hundred feet below them were other flocks and huts.

THE SORCERESS

By PAUL DE LOCK.

PART TWO

THE moan in a woman's voice startled us.

"Do you hear that, Pierre?" murmured Javert, hoarsely, close to my ear. "I heard it before I waked up. In heaven's name, what devil's jugglery is going on at this hour, think you?"

"We shall know ere long," I answered, hastily drawing my cloak about me. "See to your weapons, Claude, and follow me. 'Tis but a child's leap to the ground below, and we will find a way of climbing back, I warrant."

A moment later we stood in the garden; through it, quickly and noiselessly, we made our way till we reached and crouched down by the low window from which the light streamed; though unglazed, it was guarded by a grating, so close that light and air had some work to pass. Nevertheless, it served our purpose; and this is what we saw:

The chamber was not lofty, but so spacious that four torches, and a huge lamp suspended in the center, left the furthermost part, beyond a row of supporting pillars, in deep shadow.

From the wall opposite the window ran out a broad stone ledge, like a dais. On this, in rude arm-chairs, the center one of which was somewhat higher than the other, and had some pretension to ornament, sat three Benedictine monks. In the chief I at once recognized the prior. At a table immediately in front of these, set not far below the dais, a man attired in the long robe affected by lawyers was reading out, in a quick, monotonous voice, some documents that he had evidently been recently copying. A trial of some sort was evidently proceeding; and the accused could be none other than the woman we saw crouching low, in terror, between her guards. Her face was bowed in her hands; but even in that ungraceful posture, the rare grace of her lithe figure, and the perfect contour of every limb, could not be dissembled. When she suddenly looked up, uncovering her face, I was fairly startled by its loveliness—utterly unlike, if not excelling, anything I had ever beheld before; and it needed no second glance to assure me that my eyes rested on the face of Agnes St. Denis, the missing fiancée of Stuart Gaultier.

But what meant this strange scene?

Tossing back, half impatiently, the smooth, fine hair that flashed back the torchlight-like polished jet, the girl looked slowly about the apartment until her glance fell upon the three silent monks; and then, starting suddenly, she stretched out her slender white hands. But I noticed there was as much of petulance as of condition or appeal in the gesture, as she gazed eagerly in the faces of her judges. In two of these faces there was nothing remarkable. The prior was a portly, pompous churchman, rather benevolent-looking than otherwise, though, by virtue of his office, he bore himself austerely; and the round, rubicund visage on his left betokened no worse vices than indulgence and love of luxury. But the countenance of the right-hand monk was one of those not pleasant to remember, and therefore not easily forgotten. Sallow and atrabilious, its pallor none would impute to fast or vigil, even if the heavy animal jaw and cruel mouth had not told that, if ever such a one achieved saintliness, it would be at the cost of many hard battles with the lusts of the flesh. In his eyes there was no calm, judicial severity, but rather such a fierce eagerness as springs from bitter hate. I noticed, too, that when the prisoner's appealing glances roved around, they never dwelt, even for an instant, on this man's face.

The whole scene seemed to me to be a ghastly mockery. I could scarcely bring myself to believe that the three solemn judges, their busy legal assistants, and the four armed guards—to say nothing of the other figures grouped in the dim background—were all required to deal with a frail girl, no more fit for rough handling than a May fly. I looked on, and listened like one in a dream. There was a brief pause after the man of the law had finished reading. Then, clearing his throat importantly, the prior spoke:

"Thou some time novice in the nunnery of Mount Carmel, but having escaped thence at prompting of the Evil One, if not by his actual aid—thou knowest well wherefore thou art now set on trial; and hast heard what these have witnessed against thee. Such testimony it avails not to deny; neither may thy life be in anywise excused, whereby not scandal alone, but great damage hath been wrought. For do we not know how—having once drunken of the cup of thy witcheries—many of all stations have set at naught, not only their fair repute, but all duties of religion; so that finally, being wasted away in mind and body, no less than in substance, they have died miserably, rather like miscreants than Christian men. Also by trustworthy witnesses it hath been averred that thou hast been seen in full practice of thy accursed enchantments. Hath not Guillaume Chappelier, the sexton, made oath that he watched thee in the grave-yard at such work as these lips of mine shall not be defiled by rehearsing? And did not Antoine Tournon, returning home by night, see thee pass overhead through the air, borne on some devilish creature, the likeness of which he could not set forth for his extreme fear. Now, therefore, I adjure thee, in the name of the most Holy Trinity, to make full confession—if the familiar spirit by which, as I well believe, thou art possessed will suffer thee to speak. So, though thy life be forfeit, may some pain be spared to thy sinful body, and, peradventure, some profit may accrue to thy more sinful soul."

"A trial for sorcery," whispered Javert, in my ear, as the prior ceased speaking. "Great heavens! What devil's witchery is in this strange proceeding!"

"Hush!" I answered, warningly. "Perhaps 'tis more jest than earnest. Let us listen further."

There was a moment's silence after the somewhat pedantic charge of the prior, and then, smoothing her hair from her brow with her soft white fingers, the young girl rose slowly to her feet. Her voice trembled at first, so that it was scarcely audible; but gradually it slid into such melody as I had never listened to.

"Ah, reverend father," she began, "be patient, if not

merciful. There are none to witness on my behalf, and even could I find words, fear has left me little strength to plead. Freely will I confess that ever since that night when, under the robe of a priest now dead, I escaped from the good Carmelites, I have led the life of a fool. Neither will I deny that for my poor sake much wealth has been wasted, and some blood shed. Yet I have often refused gifts thrust upon me, rather than impoverish my friends; and when any of such came to hurt, or fell into sickness, none grieved for them more than I. Sore indeed have been my temptations. The blood of my race flows never tamely or orderly, either in love or malice; and, though of malice against any I am free, I have ever been too apt to love. But for all these sins of mine, reverend father, I am willing to do such penance as your wisdom may adjudge, and to your order I will freely give all the wealth that has accrued to me; only, I beg you, let me go forth upon my way—barefoot, if you will—so that none dwelling hereabouts may look upon my face again."

"Nay," said the prior sternly, yet not so harshly as he had spoken before, "'tis too late for such proffers. Thy goods are already forfeit. Nor is this full confession; thou hast said naught of the arts and enchantments by which thou hast wrought, nor of the Familiar by which, as we believe, thou art possessed."

The girl shrugged her round, white shoulders in a sort of pettish despair, and her delicate mouth began to pout.

"Alas! I have used no worse witcheries than men find elsewhere in bright eyes, and red lips, and white hands," she answered. "Neither have I been possessed by any other devil than he who tempts all frail womankind. Monsieur Guillaume Chapellier must have had an evil dream—not for a necklace of rubies would I set foot in a graveyard after sundown. When Antoine Tournon, the fisherman, brought me his ware, his eyes were often heavy with drink; he must have emptied many a glass that night he saw me fly across the Marne. I have never mounted on aught lighter than Blanchfleur, my fair palfrey, who will never feed from my hand again. Surely, reverend father, you will not listen to such idle tales. Father Ignace knows——"

Here, for the first time, the girl looked full at the Benedictine sitting at the right. The monk's cheeks reddened, not in a single healthy flush, but in irregular patches; and his eyes, too, waxed bloodshot.

"Why callest thou on me?" he cried hoarsely. "I know naught more than others of thine accursed sorceries. Speak out, and let us hear what falsity the Succubus within thee will utter through thy lips."

His savage glance made the girl cower like the lash of a whip. She was too frightened to use her vantage, if any she possessed.

"I meant nothing," she murmured; "only I—I thought—I hoped——"

Her voice died away in quick, convulsive sobbing, while her head dropped on her hands again. The prior, turning his head, looked somewhat doubtfully at either of his assistants—like a man who, having determined on a disagreeable duty, would not be sorry to have it gainsaid.

"Since the accused, or, rather, the demon clothed in her flesh, is obdurate," he said, "we have no choice but to apply the uttermost question."

Both gave assent, but in a different fashion—the one, with reluctance more evident even than that of his superior; the other, with absolute eagerness. The prior beckoned with his hand, and out of the shadow behind the pillars, four men, attired in novice habit, came forward; two of whom took each a torch from the wall, while the others laid hands on the prisoner's shoulders. At the first touch the girl shivered as though in an ague-fit, but let them lead her away without resistance. The three judges, too, arose and followed; and my eyes followed also.

In the dark recess there was fixed an engine, the use of which I knew at once, though it was the first time I had looked upon a rack.

As my eyes fell upon the dread instrument of torture, I pinched my arm that I might assure myself that I was really awake. A rack! And in the nineteenth century! What jugglery was this? What horrible mystery was here? Or was I, indeed, under a wizard spell, and about to behold in vision some hideous scene of the middle ages?

With strained eyeballs I watched the scene which followed. The torches made the place so light that I lost none of the preliminaries of the torture. I saw the needless violence with which the victim was prostrated and bound. I closed my eyes here, and a cold sweat, breaking out upon my brow, rained down my face. Then there came the creaking of pulleys; then a terrible shriek; then another, smothered, as though it came through a gag; then utter silence. And the prior's voice, so hoarse and changed that none would have known it, said:

"Devil or no devil, I can endure no more of this. Let her loose! See you not she has fainted?"

When I looked again the three monks had resumed their seats, and were conversing in an undertone. At last the prior spoke aloud to the scribe:

"Jean, write that we, the sworn judges here present—to wit, Aldobrand, prior of the order represented at Chalons; Ignatius, sub-prior, and Paul, almoner of the same house—have heard the testimony urged against the woman dwelling for two years past at Chalons, who is suspected on good grounds of dealing with the evil one, or of actual possession by a familiar spirit. Furthermore, that, having failed in bringing to full confession the said accused, we did, in our presence, after due deliberation, cause to be applied the extreme torture of the question, and that the accused swooned thereunder without having given intelligible word or sign. Wherefore, we, the said justiciaries—not deeming that our powers extend even unto death—have judged it better to proceed no further; but to send the prisoner, under a safe escort, to Paris, there to be dealt with as it shall seem fit to our high justiciary of this province. Whereto we set our several hands and seals."

While this was being completed, low moans were heard in the recess, and one of the novitiates came forward.

"The prisoner has revived, monsigneur. How is it your pleasure she shall be dealt with?"

"See her well guarded to her cell," the prior answered, "and let Brother Cyril attend her there. She must needs find strength for travel ere noon to-morrow. It were better that thou, Brother Ignace, should see to this; and, perforce, thou must ride with the escort to Paris. As for me, I will to my chamber; for I feel so strangely ill at ease, that lacking fresh air and a cup of wine, I fear to swoon."

At the first words of the prior, a sudden flush of anger bathed the sallow features of the monk, Ignace; but at the mention of the "escort to Paris," a look of devilish glee, the light of a fell purpose flashed into his sinister eyes.

That one look, that one unconscious movement, betrayed the thought that lurked in his villainous brain as plainly as though he had expressed that thought in words. Trusted to his escort, I felt assured, Agnes St. Denis would never reach Paris alive.

But I had heard and seen enough. I did not wait to watch the half-fainting figure carried away by the jailers, but touching my companion on the shoulder, strode back swiftly through the garden. Beneath the window of our

chamber I motioned Javert to stoop, and setting my foot on his broad shoulders, swung myself easily through the lattice. Then letting down my belt, I drew him up after me.

Once in the room, Javert sank into a chair, and covered his face with his hands.

"Pierre," he murmured hoarsely, "what a terrible scene! It seemed like a hideous nightmare to me, and has unnerved me, quite."

"A terrible scene, and a terrible household," I said. "We must be in a den of madmen. But rouse yourself, Claude, for we have work to do. Agnes St. Denis must be released at once. As for the fanatics who believe in witchcraft——"

I paused suddenly, for the rapid trot of horses' feet had fallen upon my ear. Before the house they stopped, the clanking of sabers was heard, and then came a thundering rap at the door, and a moment after I heard the quick, imperious tones of the prior:

"Paul! Up with thee, and see who tries the door!"

"It is Stuart Gaultier, and our comrades," I whispered hurriedly to Javert. "Come, let us descend."

As we reached the bottom of the stairs, Paul the Almoner had just unfastened the heavy oaken door, and the next moment M. Gaultier, accompanied by six police officers, burst into the hall.

"Where have you hidden Agnes St. Denis?" he began, excitedly, addressing the astonished crank, and then catching sight of me, rushed forward and grasped my hand.

"One moment, M. Gaultier," I said, and then addressing two of the officers:

"Gervaise and Lacorse, guard well the entrance and see to it that no one escapes!"

"What means this disgraceful scene?" said a haughty voice at that moment, and turning, I beheld the leader. "What cause brings armed men and officers of the law at this unseemly hour into a house dedicated to the service of God?"

"The cause of the wronged and tortured woman confined within these walls—the unhappy victim of your fanaticism," I answered sternly. "Hark you, Aldobrand, we have witnessed a scene this night that must have caused the angels to weep—the hideous scene enacted in the subterranean dungeon over which we stand; and by the authority of the lieutenant-general of this province, whose express sanction we have for all our acts this night, we demand that you deliver quietly into our hands the unfortunate Agnes St. Denis."

A troubled look swept over the man's pale visage.

"The woman hath been accused of sorcery," he faltered, "and——"

"From whom came the accusation?" I cried scornfully. "From one of the greatest villains, if I mistake not, that God ever allowed to breathe the breath of life—a villain who will defile the rope that hangs him."

"Perchance Ignace hath erred, yet——"

"Enough, sir! Fortunate for you that I feel assured that you were weakly deceived by a scoundrel's crafty tongue—that you and your companions were but the unwitting instruments in the execution of a fiend's plot against a woman's life, and that upon investigation, your intentions, at least, will be proven——"

"As God is my judge, I thought I but did my duty," said the man earnestly. "If I erred, may heaven forgive me. But come!" and with downcast head he led the way to the cell of Agnes St. Denis.

As we approached the wretched quarters of the fair prisoner, the faint hum of voices fell upon our hearing, and in obedience to a warning gesture from Javert, we kept well in the shadows of the massive pillars of the halls and passages, as we crept slowly and cautiously forward. In a few moments we stood variously grouped before the cell, but still concealed in the heavy shadows without.

By the dim light which pervaded the apartment, we saw the young girl stretched upon a narrow iron bed—at her side the dark-robed form of Ignace, her hand clasped in his. He was speaking, and though his attitude betokened a threat, his words were indistinguishable; but not so those of the girl, as she made reply:

"Be not so merciless. I would do much to win your favor, yet I cannot do all. The love, even of such as I, is not to be forced, especially by such rough wooing as yours."

There seemed to be the slightest shade of mocking coquetry in the last syllables. At any rate, so the fellow interpreted them, for his face grew purple as he gripped her wrist so violently as to wring from her a moan of pain.

"Darest thou yet again to deride me?" he hissed. "Hast thou not learned——"

The menace was never completed, for at that moment Stuart Gaultier, unable to contain himself longer, sprang forward, and the next instant, bruised and bleeding, the man was flung violently to the wall.

With a glad, hysterical cry, Agnes St. Denis threw herself in her lover's arms.

A brief space of silence ensued, and then Ignace, slowly recovering his scattered wits, muttered something strangely like a blasphemy and staggered to his feet. The first blank bewilderment of his face was now succeeded by the distortion of mingled rage and fear, yet less of the last than of the first was there expressed.

"Whose hand was laid on me but now," he cried hoarsely, glancing about him, yet perceiving not the shadow of a massive pillar, locked in a fond embrace, were holding sweet communion, entirely oblivious of all around them.

The words died suddenly away as his roving eyes fell upon the form of Stuart Gaultier, and for a moment he seemed to be stricken into stone. If a basilisk had confronted him, he could scarcely have betrayed more surprise or terror.

But only for a moment stood he thus; for as his leaden orbs turned slowly to the radiant face of the beautiful Agnes, a frightful look—a look I had never seen upon human countenance before—terrible that it made those shiver who heard it, swept over his livid features. With a curse so terrible that it made those shiver who heard it, he strode to where stood the youthful couple.

"Spawn of Satan!" he hissed between his clenched teeth, and before the fierce light in his evil orbs the girl shrank closer to her lover with a low cry of terror, "thinkest thou that thou shalt escape, to make mock at Ignace once more among thy friends? No; by St. Giles, no!" Then, ere I, who at the last moment had divined his fell purpose, could spring forward to prevent it, from under the dark robe came a bright flash, and, with one smothered shriek, Agnes St. Denis sank sideways to the floor, a dagger buried in her side.

Almost at the same moment there came a terrible cry of mingled rage and dismay from Stuart Gaultier—a cry that rang in our ears for many a long day after. Then a pistol-shot rang out, and with a bullet in his brain, the murderous fanatic fell, never to rise again.

It was many, many days ere Agnes St. Denis awoke again to life and reason. The terrible wound she had received was at first thought to be fatal; but kindly hands ministered to all her wants, kind friends watched night and day beside her couch of pain, and at last Cyril, the

chirurgeon, declared that the crisis was passed and that she would live.

When sufficiently recovered, the young girl related the story of her abduction, which story we briefly give as follows:

At the theater of Lemoine, a year previous, Agnes St. Denis had formed the acquaintance of Ignace. The scoundrel had often visited the place before. He at once fell in love with the beautiful girl, and entreated her to become his wife, but his very presence inspired her with horror and she emphatically refused. For months he persecuted her with his odious attentions, enlisting, as a last resource, the sympathies of the manager to aid him, but of no avail. Then it was that he had sworn a deadly oath to be revenged.

Three months elapsed, and he was seen no more by Agnes St. Denis until the morning of Easter Sunday. The meeting has been described in the preceding pages. He renewed his entreaties, offering in return for her hand the luxury and surroundings of an empress. Her reply was once more an emphatic refusal.

"Then hark thee," he hissed between his clenched teeth, his voice hoarse with passion. "If thou wilt not accept the love of Ignace, thou shalt at least learn how he can hate. I am I member of a secret order which will deal harshly with you later on."

He left her, and she, thinking little of his threats, made her way homeward.

That evening, a little after dark, Madame Lemoine, her landlady, entered her chamber and informed her that a gentleman waited to see her. Entirely unsuspicious of danger, she descended the stairs and opened the door. Upon the steps, flashily attired in civilian dress, an evil smile upon his forbidding countenance, stood Ignatius. Ere the girl could close the door again, he sprang forward, with a low laugh, and caught her in his arms. She would have cried for help, but before she could execute the intention a sponge, filled with some pungent liquid, was pressed to her nostrils, and almost instantly she lost consciousness.

When she came to her senses again, she found herself lying upon a rude settee in a bare and cheerless room. Beside her stood two men, clad in long and sable robes, their faces pale, cold and impassive. A moment she lay staring at them, too bewildered to speak; then, as the occurrence of Easter evening flashed through her mind, she uttered a sudden cry of terror, sprang to her feet, and rushed toward the door. But escape was impossible —two heavy hands were almost instantly upon her shoulders, two pairs of cold, pitiless eyes were fastened on her face.

"Release me at once!" she cried hysterically. "I have been trapped and made a prisoner; why, I know not; but you will detain me at your peril. Poor as I am, there are those who will protect me, and I warn you that harm will come of it if you keep me here!"

"Do not excite yourself," said one of her captors.

"It will be impossible for you to go forth again to-night, since it is dark as Erebus, and you are some miles from home. Content yourself to stay with us."

"I will not stay one instant!" interrupted the girl; but as she spoke the entrance door shut with a resounding clang, and the ponderous bolts shot into place.

"You see," said Ignace, "the doors are closed for the night—you cannot go. Come," with a sudden change of tone, "do not compel us to use force."

There was no alternative—nothing to do but submit for the present, and with dire forebodings Agnes signified her willingness to go quietly.

Their way was long and devious, through unlighted halls, and up and down what seemed to Agnes interminable flights of stairs. At last they stood before a door, in what seemed to Agnes one of the upper corridors of the house.

"Go in," said he who had spoken before; but the girl, after one hurried glance at the interior, shrank back against the wall.

"In mercy's name," she cried, "do not put me in there!" but the man was inexorable.

"Go in!" he said again; and this time he laid a heavy compelling hand on the girl's arm. Terrified beyond measure Agnes obeyed, and as she stepped over the threshold the door shut behind her, and she heard the key turn in the lock.

"I shall leave the light on the table outside," said the fanatic, looking in at the square, grated aperture in the door, "and will bring you some supper."

He disappeared, but in a few moments returned with a tray, on which was a roll of bran bread, a glass of milk, and a small piece of cheese.

"Eat," he said, and then he was gone, and Agnes was alone.

The next day found the young girl in a high fever, and for three days she lay unconscious of her surroundings. On the fourth, however, she wakened to life and memory again, and found herself still a prisoner in the cell, with Paul sitting beside her; and as she looked up into the man's face she saw that it wore a gentler expression than before.

"You have been very ill," he said, "and you have talked much in your delirium; say no more now, but rest. I think I can see help for you."

And then Agnes closed her tired eyes and slept.

The next day, and the next, a strange man took Paul's place, but on the next he came back, and while busying himself about her head he said in a low voice, looking keenly in her face the while——

"What is your name?"

"Agnes St. Denis."

"You mentioned the name of Ignatius in your delirium; tell me of your relations with him."

Briefly and frankly Agnes recited the facts.

"I believe you," said the man when she had finished, "but no one here will. I am going to Paris to-morrow; write a few words on this paper and I will try to drop it where it will bring help. Have you any friends in Paris?"

She mentioned the name of Stuart Gaultier, giving at the same time his street and number.

"Very well, then," said the man. "But we must hasten, my child, for in three days you are to be tried for sorcery. Remember this is the monastery and write as few words as possible. I would that I could do more for you, but Father Ignatius bears me company to the city to-morrow, and it will be impossible for me to rid myself of his presence even for a moment. He knows that I bear but scant reverence for him, and suspicious in turn, he watches my every movement as a cat does a mouse. Within three walls I am powerless to aid you—Ignace rules the whole household. Even the leader, a worthy but most credulous man, is completely under his evil influence, and believes every tale, however wild, that passes his lips. Hence your incarceration, and approaching trial."

"The rest of the painful story is known to you, M. Chassac," concluded the young girl. "Thank heaven that you were enabled to save me from further suffering and despair."

A few months after the events recorded in the foregoing pages, the bells rang out a merry peal over the happy wedding of Agnes St. Denis and Stuart Gaultier.

THE GENTLEMAN FROM ARIZONA

By ARTHUR POTTOW.

ONE winter evening, a few years ago, Charley Winthrop stood warming himself at an open fire in an apartment of the house in which he lived in New York.

There was a more than usually pleasant look upon his handsome face. For one thing he had been to Manhattan Field, and had seen Yale, his old 'Varsity, triumph. But this fact, gratifying to his feelings as it was, did not account for the frequent quiet laughs which he gave. He held in his hand a letter, and this was the probable cause, for whenever he glanced at it his merriment increased.

He read it again—for the twentieth time during the day—and as he was alone he read it aloud.

"Your Uncle Ephraim, of Denver," the letter said, "will be at your house to-night, some time. He will probably present himself in such a form as to hide his identity, for he wishes to put you to a test. He wants to discover what your real character is, and will take you by surprise. The writer ascertained this by accident, and made haste to warn you, having a friendly interest in you for your mother's sake. Don't neglect this advice."

"Wonder who the man is who sent this letter; one of my mother's old Denver friends probably," mused Charley. "Anyway, it was awfully good of him. By Jove! I'll get even with Uncle Eph before this night's through."

When Charley received the letter in the morning, his first care was to despatch a telegram to Denver. He received a reply, saying that his uncle had started for New York, and according to his informant was about due there that evening.

For nearly twenty years Ephraim Harley had lived in the West, toiling hard and gaining riches, and during this time he and his nephew had never met, though they frequently corresponded. The circumstance of his visiting New York, after such a prolonged absence, without notifying his nephew, added weight to the warning contained in this mysterious letter.

"By jingo!" cried the young man, walking rapidly up and down the room, "I see it all. Old Eph's heard of my extravagance and recklessness, and he thinks I'm another Charles Surface. He's returning loaded with dollars, like Sir Oliver Surface in Sheridan's play, and if he finds my heart's all right, I'll fare as well as the hero of the drama did. Heaven knows money will be very acceptable just now."

It was an odd freak on his uncle's part, but he was not greatly surprised that the old gentleman's visit was to be made under such peculiar circumstances. He knew, for he had heard his mother often say so, that her brother delighted in perpetrating practical jokes on his friends, and no doubt the habit was with him still.

Charley Winthrop's financial position was so well defined, that it was only a matter of time, and a very short time, too, when the crash must come. Meanwhile, true to his nature, he was as light hearted as ever.

People said that he was the gayest bachelor in New York, but when they said so they did not mean to imply that he was vicious, for this would not have been true. He bewildered his friends by his eccentricities, or dazzled them by his reckless extravagance, but he never shocked them. His record might have been better, but it could easily have been worse.

At this moment, arrayed in evening dress, he was awaiting the arrival of nine or ten of his friends, whom he had invited to a bachelor dinner at his house to celebrate his birthday.

"Seven-thirty," he said, looking at his watch; "those fellows ought to be here soon," and as he said the words, Parker, his English servant, appeared at the door.

"Mr. Morrison," he announced, as a tall young man entered the room.

"Why, Jack, old chap, I'm glad to see you. How are you?' was the cheery greeting of the host. "I've something to tell you."

He had determined to take Jack Morrison into his confidence, but his intention was frustrated. Scarcely had he spoken when in quick succession a number of noisy, laughing young men arrived.

All these "Jacks" and "Charleys," as they were called, were soon busily engaged in discussing the football game and quarreling over the result.

"I must tell them," said Winthrop, "it's too good to keep to myself."

But he had no chance. The conversation only stopped when there came a loud and continuous ringing at the street bell. For a moment everybody was silent.

"Can't be the sheriff," laughed Jack Morrison.

"I don't expect him—yet," answered the host, smiling.

He had moved as near the open door as possible, and from where he stood he could hear talk going on in the hall down-stairs, and was able to catch most of the words.

"I reckon, young feller, yer boss 'd make ye skip ef he war hyar. By gosh! this ain't the way to treat a gen'leman," said a voice, the tone of which and the language being distinctly of the West.

Charley instantly thought of the mysterious letter and smiled. "Uncle Eph!" he muttered. "Well, I'm ready for him."

He rang the bell, and Parker appeared.

"What is it, Parker?"

"Hit's a low fellow has wishes to see you, sir, and I can't get rid of 'im."

"Wishes to see me, does he, Parker? Why, show him up at once. I won't keep any man waiting."

"Except a creditor," said Jack Morrison, sotto voce.

Parker was so well accustomed to his master's eccentricities, and so well drilled, that he had never displayed any surprise at his actions. He blamed himself severely for having done so on this occasion. He had distinctly raised his eyebrows.

"Jim Brook, of Brookville, Arizona, thet's me. Say, ye kin put 'Mister' on to et, d'ye hear?"

Jim Brook's voice was so loud and penetrating, and every word he said on the stairs to the servant was so audible to Charley Winthrop and his guests, that there really was no necessity to announce him. He had announced himself. But Parker never forgot the proprieties.

"Mr. James Brook!" he said in a loud voice as the visitor appeared.

"Jim, Mister Jim, I reckon 's 'bout the size of et," interrupted the gentleman from Arizona; "thar's no 'James' 'bout me."

"Jim or James," said Charley pleasantly as he advanced to meet him, and proffered his hand. "Either will find himself equally welcome here."

The host and his visitor shook hands heartily.

"Yer the whitest man I've struck in this big town, mister," said Jim Brook.

"Charley's overdoing it a bit this time," whispered Algy Sinclair to Jack Morrison.

No one else made any remark or gave any indication that he felt surprise at the strange conduct of his host, though all the guests might have done so without having their good breeding questioned.

For Jim Brook was anything but a presentable person. His attire and appearance furnished a remarkable contrast to the living pictures in black and white that were around him.

Clothed in well-worn garments he had a ragged beard and long, unkempt hair, and his shrunken trousers and several apertures in his shoes showed him to be as sockless as Jerry Simpson himself. His red nose gave him a vicious look, and not the least of his charms was a black patch, which apparently concealed the loss of an eye.

Before Charley could ask him the nature of his business dinner was announced.

"You must dine with me, Mr. Brook," said Charley; "we can have our talk later. No, no, I won't take a denial. This is my birthday and I drive no man from my board. Parker, place a chair for Mr. Brook."

He rose rather unsteadily to his feet, and with shaking hands held his glass before him.

"I say, old fellow," whispered Algy Sinclair, "have we got to eat with Dusty Rhodes?"

"Consider him the skeleton at the feast," answered Jack Morrison. "Don't crowd him too close and you won't get hurt."

"Take Mr. Brook's hat, Parker."

"Yes, sir."

"Go slow, young man," said the gentleman from Arizona, handing the servant a dilapidated derby whereof the brim and the crown seemed about to part company, "or ye'll do et a mischief."

His eyes followed the hat as if it were a relic of inestimable value, until Parker had disappeared. Then he sat down.

He not only found himself at Charley Winthrop's table, but inasmuch as he sat at his host's right hand, he might consider himself the guest of honor.

As the dinner proceeded, Charley saw that it was with difficulty that his friends kept their astonishment within due limits. But as they became warmed with wine, they paid less attention to Mr. Jim Brook, and more to the funny stories that followed each other without cessation.

Now Charley was watching his special guest quite keenly, and none the less so because he appeared to be indifferent to the stranger's actions. He became quite sure of the man's identity, for his apparent age and figure tallied with that of his Uncle Ephraim, so far as he could judge from portraits he had seen.

If Jim Brook had been accustomed to polite society he certainly succeeded marvelously well in concealing the fact. Charley thought he rather overdid the part he was assuming.

"He doesn't know where to draw the line," said the young man.

The gentleman from Arizona might have been rehearsing for a public performance as a sword swallower from the way in which he thrust his knife down his throat, and of the duties of the fork he entertained the most elementary notion. Still he did not drink from his finger-bowl and he was entitled to credit for such abstinence, notwithstanding that his refraining from doing so, so far as the other guests knew, was probably due to the fact that he had a deep-rooted objection to the liquid the vessel contained.

After coffee had been served, the guests moved about freely, interchanging places and applying themselves vigorously to the wines before them.

The host took advantage of this proceeding to whisper in the ears of several of his friends.

"Don't look surprised, old chap, at what I'm going to tell you," said Charley. "I expect you were astonished when you saw him sit down with us. Your faces said as much, and I'm not surprised. Well, now don't shout; Jim Brook's simply my rich Uncle Ephraim disguised. He's worth millions of dollars, my boy. He thought to play me a trick, but this time he got left."

Those to whom Charley had spoken hastened to acquaint their neighbors with this astonishing piece of news, and in a few minutes the behavior of all the guests towards the stranger had undergone a change. Notwithstanding their host's admonition, they displayed their altered feelings in the respect with which they treated the disguised millionaire. Many were the congratulations Charley received upon his shrewdness.

"It's the smartest thing Charley ever did," said one man, and he expressed the general opinion.

All the men at the table wished to drink with Jim Brook, and he gratified their desire, never refusing what was offered him.

He rose rather unsteadily to his feet, and with shaking hands held his glass before him.

"Gents all," said he, "'fore we part I'd like to jest say 's yer the squarest lot I've ever chipped in with. As fer you, mister,"—addressing Charley Winthrop—"yer a peach. Say, what are ye anyway?"

"I'm a philosopher," answered the young man with a laugh.

"Never heard of that bis'ness 'fore, mister. What may et be?"

"It's a man——"

"Stop!" cried Algy Sinclair. "Jack's going to tell us."

"It's a man," said Jack Morrison, sententiously, "who ignores the past lives for the present, and forgets the future."

"Waal, Mister Philos'pher, an' gents all, yer dinner's good, and yerselves are better. Hyar's all yer healths."

Mr. Brook emptied two glasses of champagne, for one was not sufficient to do justice to the sentiment.

"You mustn't go yet," said Charley; "you want to have a talk with me, don't you?"

But Jim Brook appeared to be past talking. He threatened to collapse, and so it was decided to take him to Charley's room, where he might lie down and recuperate.

After his departure naturally he formed the sole topic of conversation.

"He's my mother's brother," said Charley Winthrop.

"The family likeness was remarkable," observed Jack.

"My dear Charley," said one of the young men, "pardon me for saying so, but what a very eccentric family yours must be."

"We have some peculiarities."

"Guess he'll put you on your feet again," said Algy Sinclair.

"He must, Algy. I'm the only relative he has in the world, and after the way I've behaved to-night he can't go back on me."

The health of Charley's uncle was then drunk with three times three, and Jack Morrison had just started the bacchanalian ditty "For he's a jolly good fellow," and it was being sung to several different tunes, when Parker suddenly appeared in the room with a handsome elderly gentlemen by his side.

"Mr. Hephraim 'Arley," said Parker, in his expressionless way, with his usual cruelty towards the aspirate.

The gentleman who was thus announced advanced a few paces into the room with his hand outstretched, staring in a somewhat bewildered manner around him at the numerous faces he saw.

"I heard you drinking my health, and I thank you, gentlemen. Which of you is Charley Winthrop, my nephew?" This was all he said.

It was quite enough to strike every one dumb with astonishment. Charley rallied from the shock quicker than the others. He realized almost instantly what had happened. Jim Brook had left the bedroom by another door, with the connivance of Parker, who, no doubt, was in the secret. Then he had changed his clothes hastily to reappear as the cultured gentleman and millionaire, Ephraim Harley.

Charley burst into a loud fit of laughter.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" he cried, "not bad, uncle. By Jove! it was a clever piece of acting."

Ephraim Harley stared in apparent astonishment at the laughing faces around him, and seemed to be too astonished to say anything.

"But I saw through it," continued Charley, shouting boisterously now. "I found you out in spite of the disguise, for to tell you the truth, Uncle Eph, you rather overdid the part. Still your make-up was great."

"Young gentleman," said Ephraim Harley, sternly. "you must be either mad or drunk. Please explain yourself, if you're in a condition to do so."

All the young men saw that Uncle Eph was in a very bad temper, and that any further jokes at his expense would be very ill received, and their mirth was immediately restrained. Charley altered his tone too, for he did not wish to damage the good impression his previous conduct must have made.

But still he was bound to laugh loudly as he explained the events of the night to his uncle, and he felt that his doing so was only a farce, for of course the old gentleman was well acquainted with all that had passed, though he flatly denied the accusation.

"I'll see the scamp for myself, and have a talk with him, if he's fit to speak to me," said Uncle Eph, walking towards the bedroom.

"You won't find Mr. Jim Brook there, uncle. He's disappeared forever."

A few minutes later Uncle Ephraim came back and he had a letter in his hand.

"I found this," alluding to the letter, "in the room. It's addressed to 'Mr. Charles Winthrop.' You'd better read it."

"Oh, pray do it for me, sir," laughed Charley. "I dare say you're better acquainted with the writing. You'll find it easier to read than I will."

Charley gave a sly look at his companions as if to intimate to them that it was useless trying to deceive him. His guests were all awaiting the moment when Mr. Harley would make a full confession.

Savagely the last named gentleman tore open the envelope, for he was boiling with rage now, and he read aloud these words:

"I liked yer dinner and yer society very much, Mr. Winthrop, and I've taken jest a few things with me to remember you by. Being a philos'pher, he won't mind.

JIM BROOK."

Charley sprang to his feet and rushed frantically into the room. He found no Jim Brook there. Neither did any portion of his costly jewelry remain. Everything of a valuable and portable nature had disappeared.

Charley collapsed. He found he had been victimized by a clever scoundrel, who in some unaccountable manner had obtained an accurate knowledge of Mr. Harley's movements, and had availed himself of it.

Each of the guests was sworn to strict secrecy, which means that within twenty-four hours the matter was the talk of the town.

Glad to escape from the raillery of his friends, and to recruit his fortunes, Charley Winthrop went out West with his uncle. The last time he was in New York—he shows himself there occasionally—he met his old friend, Jack Morrison, and Jack had a few mutual friends with him. They lined up arm in arm before Charley, danced several steps, and let out a roar of laughter.

Charley sized them up carefully and asked: "What's up?"

By the way of reply he received another roar of merriment and a more violent wink.

"I say," he began doubtfully.

But he got no farther, for Morrison separated himself from the rest and, approaching, he gave Charley a slap on the back, after which he carefully seized him by the ear, bent over and hissed hoarsely:

"Hello, Charley, old fellow, how are you? I want to ask you a question. Since you've been out West, have you run across 'the gentleman from Arizona?' Stop! Stop! Don't go!"

But Charley had fled.

THE CROYDEN CASE

A Detective Serial

BY POLICE CAPTAIN HOWARD

CHAPTER FIVE

A SCENE IN THE DEPTHS OF LONDON

IN a few minutes afterwards Madge's sorrows were over, and her soul was in another world.

Mr. Hoffman took up the papers and put them away carefully in the inside pocket of his coat. He then turned to speak to Lady Anne, but found that she had left the room, and he was alone with the corpse.

Thus Madge had died, and the secret of her life died with her. No one knew of her relationship to William Rupel. The forged will was now in the possession of Mr. Hoffman, who had Lady Anne in his power, if he should ever choose to expose what he had seen her attempt to do.

It was the night after the duel. The day following there had been a thaw, and the streets of London were full of slush and mud. The snow was falling in thick flakes, so that it was impossible for the passer-by to see any great distance ahead of him. The light of the street lamps looked pale and sickly. Very few persons were abroad, and in the unfrequented parts of the city everything was as quiet as a grave-yard. "The slums" was also quiet. Only the occasional hoarse laugh of some party of carousers in issuing from some low drinking saloon broke the silence which encompassed the surroundings.

It was through one of the dirtiest of streets belonging to the slums that the figures of two men were noticed to be hurrying along, as if they had a certain point to reach, at a given time, and that that time was almost past. They were both muffled about the head with large comforters, and only a small space was left open below the eyes, so that they could see.

"We're late now," said the younger of the two as they came under the rays of the street light.

"He'll wait for us," rejoined the other in a coarse voice as he pushed on.

"Do you think that he will undertake the job?" queried the young man, who by his conversation showed that he belonged to an entirely different rank of life than his companion.

"No doubt. I saw him this afternoon, and he said that for a good round sum of money he will do whatever you want him to do."

"I'm short of cash at this moment, as you know. I wish that I had killed that dog instead of only wounding him."

"Well, you did your best, and it was through no fault of yours that he now lives. Can't you forge his name to a check? He won't be able to leave the house for some time, and he will not discover the deficiency in his bank account until it is too late, and if our friend succeeds he will never discover it, and you will be the owner of the property."

"What you suggest is a good idea, but then I am afraid to risk it. Hold! I may be able to suggest something better. Do you think that he will take a portion of the money now, and the balance after he has done the job?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because if he will, I may be able to get some money from my mother."

"How much do you think that you can get?"

"About five hundred pounds."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Almost sure. She promised to let me have that amount for another purpose, and I can get it and use it for this."

"If you can do this then we will be all right. Well, here we are at last." Bang! bang! bang!

This last remark was made as the twain stopped before a dingy-looking grog-shop, in the center of the block of the long and narrow street which they had been traversing. Here and there from the dirty windows of the equally dirty tenements shone the light of a candle, but beyond this there were no other lights in the street. The shop at which they had stopped and rapped on the door was enveloped in darkness. It was after midnight, and the customers had left some hours before.

Bang! bang! bang!

Again went the foot of the young man's companion against the door, and then he demanded in a loud voice:

"Why, in the name of the fiend can't you let us in, and not keep us waiting outside in the cold."

No response, and again bang! bang! bang! bang! bang! Followed by a series of oaths that all the imps of darkness could not have improved upon if they had tried.

"I thought he would not wait for us," said the young man.

"Yes, he did; here he comes," answered his companion, as a shuffling of feet was heard coming toward the door. Then bolts were drawn, and a minute after the two men stood in the center of the saloon, and were confronted by a tall, well-built man, with a dark face, which wore a scowl, that showed that he was mad about something. With an oath he demanded:

"Why didn't you come at the time appointed? I was just preparing to go out, and go down to the crib."

"We were delayed by a little accident," returned the young man, as he unwound his comforter, and displayed to view his face. It was Clarence Rupel and his companion was the man who had acted as his second. His eye still bore the traces of the blow, notwithstanding the fact that he had tried to have it disguised by having it painted.

"Come into the back room," said the owner of the saloon, after he had bolted the door; "there we can talk without the fear of being disturbed."

The man led the way into a small room behind the saloon. In the center was a rickety deal table, and around this was placed a number of chairs. The ceiling was so covered with cobwebs that it was impossible to tell what color it had originally been. The walls were hung with flashy prints, the lower ones of which were covered with

daubs of tobacco-juice. The floor was worse than the walls, and as Clarence Rupel took a seat at the table with his companion, he shuddered when he looked at the filth that surrounded him. The man whom they had come to see noticed the look of disgust on his visitor's face, and he remarked as he took a seat opposite to him:

"Well, my covey, the surroundings don't seem to agree with your stomach. No Brussels carpet here; no lace curtains, eh?" and as he let forth a chuckle, he seemed to enjoy what he had said, and think it was amusing.

"Fred Kissam," said the man to Clarence Rupel's companion, "you said something this afternoon about a job that you wanted put through?"

"Yes," answered Clarence's second, who was an evil-visaged fellow, dark-complexioned, and short and stout in build, and from his appearance one could see that he would stoop to almost anything if he were well paid for it. "Yes, yes, my young friend here will tell you more about it than I can, Ben Sherman."

"Your name is Clarence Rupel?" said the man addressed as Ben Sherman. "You are the brother of William Rupel, the noted member of the House of Commons?"

"I am."

"And you want to engage me to have that gentleman put out of the country?"

"I do."

"You fought a duel with him last night, and he is now lying at Croyden Abbey suffering from the wound which you inflicted?"

"I fought the duel."

"The doctors state that he will recover?"

"Yes."

"There's where you are doing wrong, my friend," said Ben Sherman coolly, as his brow was overcast with a frown; "better let him get well. If he dies now, the news of the duel will go abroad, and you will have to suffer for killing him. If you let him get well, then you can have him tackled, and no one will suspect you."

"I never thought of that."

"It's always well to look at all sides. This is a very risky piece of business on account of him being so prominent."

"How much will you take to do the job?" asked Clarence, after a short silence.

"I didn't say that I would do it," cautiously replied Sherman, and in an offhand manner, as if it did not concern him in any way.

"Fred led me to infer that you were perfectly safe, and that you would take charge of this matter if I paid you well," said Clarence Rupel, with a look of chagrin on his face.

"Well, I might be induced to take charge of this for you, providing you pay well. How much are you willing to give?"

"How much do you want?"

"The thing is risky—let me see." Sherman rested his head on his hands for some moments in deep thought, and then he raised his face, and asked:

"How would £2,000 suit you?"

"That's a large sum of money," answered Rupel.

"No doubt; but, then, the risks are great," answered the saloonkeeper; "and then I will have to get some one to assist me."

"Well, I'll agree to pay you that."

"All right; let's have that in writing," said Ben, arising from the table and going to a small closet, from which he took pen, paper and ink, and placed them before Clarence.

"I don't care to write anything," said Clarence, his face ashy white, and great beads of perspiration standing out on his forehead.

"Well, then, I don't care to do the job," answered Ben Sherman, in a dogged manner.

"Not if I pay you the money?"

"An agreement is an agreement, and you gents sometimes forget what you promise. You have promised me £2,000, and I want you to make that promise in writing, unless you can give me the money immediately."

"I can't do that."

"I thought so. You might go away from here to-night, and, after we next meet, you might say you never agreed to give me anything."

"Well, I will give you a promise in writing," answered Clarence, as he took the pen in his trembling hand and wrote the promise as Ben Sherman dictated it. When this was done the man said:

"I'll want £500 in cash right away, and the balance when I accomplish the job."

"I'll pay you that in a few days," answered Clarence, as he and Fred arose and prepared to go.

"You must get it by to-morrow night," said the man, and he showed by his manner unless his demand was complied with that he would refuse to do anything.

"I'll try and do it," answered Clarence.

"There is no trying. You must have it."

"Ben, give us a few days," urged Kissam.

"I have told you to-morrow night, and unless that money is forthcoming then, I will blow on the whole scheme."

"All right. Keep faith with us, Mr. Sherman," said Clarence, in a frightened voice, "and we will keep faith with you."

The two then left Ben Sherman's, and after they were out of sight that villain said, as he closed the door:

"What fools some men are! Here is this young cove, for instance, who gave me this piece of paper to-night. If I should choose to squeal on him this signature of his would convict him. He is in my power now, and he will have to do as I say. £2,000! Ha! ha! ha! He is lucky if he gets off with ten times that amount. Hello! what is this?"

This exclamation was occasioned by Ben Sherman stumbling over a dark object which was lying on the floor. The saloonkeeper held the light so that its rays would fall on the object, and the minute he did so, there was displayed to view the form of a woman. She seemed to be fast asleep. Stooping over her, Sherman caught her by the shoulder and shook her vigorously.

"It's Nell," he said, as he shook her again. Receiving no response, he placed the lamp upon the bar, stooped down, put his arm around the delicate form, and lifted her upon her feet. As he did this, the woman's hat fell to the floor, and her shawl dangled from one shoulder.

"Nell, Nell, wake up," Sherman demanded, as he shook her more vigorously with both hands.

"Let me alone," she murmured, as she opened her eyes for a moment and then closed them again.

"Wake up. How comes it that you are here at this hour? I thought that you went home before I locked up."

"Let me alone!"

"I'll not—wake up and tell me why you are here so late?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No; where am I?"

"At the Customs."

"Oh, I remember now," said the woman, who was now fully awake. She put her hand in her pocket, and then jumped suddenly to her feet.

"Ben, Ben, my pocketbook is gone," she excitedly exclaimed, as she clutched the man's arm. "Yes, yes, and my ear-rings, too," she said, as she placed her hands up to her ears.

"The devil you say! Who were you with last?"

"I don't remember."

"Think!"

"I can't. All that I remember is that two men came in when you went behind the bar. They sat down at this table, and that is all I know."

"Do you know what they looked like?"

"No."

"Well, the things are gone, and there is no use crying over spilt milk. I'll try and find out who did it, and if I catch them I'll make them suffer. Put your things on and we will go over to the Crib."

The woman did as she was ordered. As she stood so that the rays of the light fell on her, she displayed a remarkably pretty face and handsome form. A wealth of dark-brown hair covered her head, and her eyes shone with brilliancy as she looked at the man before her. She was well dressed, and her attire was out of keeping with her present surroundings. When one looked closely at her face and that of Ben Sherman, one could see a marked resemblance. She was pretty, while her brother's features were nothing more than ordinary. Her language was choice and well selected, and in fact she had the whole bearing of a woman of the best society.

She was of great aid to her brother in all of his most dangerous undertakings, and she acquitted herself so well on all occasions, that finally the men with whom she associated called her by the nickname of Queen Nell. This was not an empty name, for to a certain extent she was queen among them, and they always went to her for advice about the most difficult jobs. This she freely gave, and if the whole truth were known, she planned the greater portion of the most daring robberies. She had thus far avoided the vigilance of the London detectives, and proved herself far superior to them in some things. Her knowledge of men and of the city was extensive. Her ways of life were varied. One day she would be living at her handsomely furnished apartments on Saville Row, and the next in the dingy rooms of the Crib, in the center of the slums.

At her house in Saville Row, she was known by the name of the Countess de Bouillon. She spoke French fluently, and had managed to gather around her the best society in London. When she took up her residence in those quarters a few years before, she was supposed to be an American heiress who had married a French count who died shortly after they were married. The supposed widow was greatly sought after by the young London swells, among whom she had many ardent admirers. Her beauty was the leading topic of the clubs for some time, and finally she succeeded in becoming a leader of the fashions of the set to which she belonged. She always spent large sums of money, and gave lavish and expensive receptions. This confirmed the fact that she must be worth a great deal of money, or she never could afford to support such an establishment. As she was acknowledged to be the Queen of the Slums by her brother's associates, so she was acknowledged to be, to some extent, a queen of the beauty of the upper-tendom of London society.

As Ben Sherman and his sister were leaving the Customs he turned, and said:

"Nell, I have a job on hand that I want you to aid me in."

"All right, Ben; I shall do my best to make it successful if there is enough money in it."

They now walked hurriedly along the dirty street toward the part of the slums where the Crib was situated. The countess asked:

"How much money is there in this thing?"

"Two thousand pounds, and more besides if we play our cards properly."

As they passed on out of sight the figure of a man came from the darkness of a doorway, and, as he looked in the direction the couple had gone, he murmured:

"Two thousand pounds if we play properly. I wonder what is up. Some big game to be bagged no doubt. I will find out. I think I know the man. It's Ben Sherman, the keeper of the Customs. I don't know the woman. Her face was too closely veiled, and in the hurry of their passing I was not able to catch distinctly the sound of her voice. I will follow them and see where they go. If there be anything new in the wind Scotland Yard will catch on to it. £2,000—there must be big game somewhere."

Phil Roach, the detective, pulled the collar of his coat up closer about his ears, pulled his hat more over his eyes, and started off at a brisk pace in the direction in which Ben Sherman and his sister had gone. For some blocks he went on, when at last he stopped, and said:

"I've missed them. They must have turned some corner, or gone into some one or other of these numerous tenements. They won't do anything to-night, it's evident, as it will soon be daylight. I'll keep a sharp watch after Mr. Sherman, and find out what he is up to."

So saying, the detective started off, making his way toward Scotland Yard, which he reached at five o'clock. He received some orders from his superior about a case which he had in hand, and, without saying anything to any one about what he had heard, he gave in his report, left the Yard, and went to his lodgings.

Phil Roach was one of the smartest detectives of the Scotland Yard force, and was always given the most difficult cases to work up. He very seldom failed, and was feared greatly by all the desperate characters in London. Hundreds of attempts had been made upon his life, but he always managed to thwart his enemies.

He was an Irishman by birth. When he was quite young his parents had moved to London, where they died soon after their arrival, and Phil was thrown on his own resources. A noted detective was attracted by the brightness of the lad one day, when he was working up a case in the slums, and after hearing the boy's story, he adopted him, gave him a fair education, and trained him for the profession in which in after life he became so noted.

Phil Roach was a man of about thirty years of age; he was tall and slim; had light hair and a pair of light-gray eyes, which gave him a sort of dreamy appearance. He was not dreamy, though, by any means, and when excited about anything his eyes would sparkle like diamonds.

He was gifted with what people ordinarily call "second sight." He had cultivated this faculty and had found it to be of great aid to him. He never boasted of what he had seen when he was in a materialistic state, and few of his comrades knew of his possessing any greater powers than they did.

Another thing that had made him so successful, perhaps, was his close attention to the smallest details of the case that he might have in hand. He never passed by a thing as insignificant, but gave it as much attention as if it had been the most important clue.

It was this close attention to small things which had made him prick up his ears at what he had heard Ben Sherman say, and made him determine that he would find out what the conversation meant.

(To be continued)

AS A PHANTOM FLEETING

By JESSIE BARTLETT DAVIS

IT was in one of the Twentieth streets, far over on the East Side, that Genaro, the sculptur, lived. A noisome neighborhood, where huge, gaunt tenements fester amid gas tanks, factories, coal and lumber yards. Up from the gullets of the sewers that pour into the river floats the miasma of New York, which induces the vigorous brawn that enables the gamins who bathe there to become handsome policemen at twenty-four.

On the top floor of the ricketiest rear house of them all, Genaro carved among other subjects his own humble career. Genaro, tall, lithe, tawny, who had inherited his complexion from the muddy banks of the Tiber; and Genaro's wife, who used to sell flowers and confetti in the shadow of St. Peter's. Genaro's baby, also, whose "vast and wondrous dome" was the Jumbo tank of the River Gas Company.

It was Sunday morning in raw November, and Mrs. Genaro, released from her toil of the week, slept heavily in the inner room, heedless of the rattling sash that brawled with the fierce gale from the shore. She worked from seven in the morning till nearly nine at night, as cashier in a quick-lunch restaurant, whose myriad mirrors and clattering dishes often turned her pretty, tired head dizzy. She was well regarded by her employers who, once in a while, allowed her the great trust of presenting pay-to-bearer checks at their bank. She was ogled by all the dyspeptic pie-eating clerks, and rather sniffingly surveyed by the tea-sot saleshadies and typists, who could not suffer her Madonna face and ravishingly languorous eyes. Poor little beauty!

While she lay all snuggled up in the threadbare quilt, Genaro in the next room was modeling with his long, flat fingers a female bust. It was the figure of a young girl, wearing a wide-spreading hat, that seemed to shadow her face and make the hollow orbits of her eyes deeper and more beautifully mysterious, the mouth curving in an innocent smile at once tempting and alluring.

It was such a face as one sees daily on Broadway or Twenty-third street, guarded by those picturesque peddlers from the land of ruins who never seem to have any purchasers.

There were a dozen or more copies of this piece carefully arranged along the mantel and on the stone in front of a dismally suggestive hollow grate.

With one foot, half penetrating his straw slipper, Genaro jogged a clumsy cradle, in which the baby whined and chirruped by turns, according as he bit his rubber ring or the tip of his tiny red tongue.

Rafaelo, the baby, was teething.

In ten minutes the model had to be laid aside for the baby, who was squalling most piteously.

Genaro paced up and down to quiet him lest his weary mother should awaken. Tranquilly Rafaelo began to tug at his sire's silken mustache. His lip was almost in a fever, but Genaro only swore musically under his breath and softly closed the door of the bedroom. Then he continued his tiresome trot till a knock brought him to a halt.

"Come in," he replied in his suave, Southern tones.

At once there entered a tall, muscular man, warmly wrapped in a long ulster, the mere sight of which made Genaro for the moment forget that the temperature of his abode was just forty degrees.

The newcomer unbuttoned his coat and lowered his collar, meanwhile half seating himself on the plain deal table. His oldish, shaven countenance was strong, but not at all handsome. Yet he had about him that exquisite, ruddy crisp air of one of those privileged human beings who are bathed and massaged by a valet once in each twenty-four hours.

Genaro was not slow to recognize the type. He had studied it often while wandering in meditation and hunger in the region of Madison Square. The baby—precocious, pretty, prattling, as the children of over-young and loving parents generally are—seemed profoundly interested He forgot that he was teething, and gazed at the stranger in silence.

The latter, whose eyes had been regarding somewhat oddly the numerous copies of the female bust, while he turned his slouch hat nervously in his hands, at last spoke in a constrained, though not unpleasant voice.

"Did you make those?" he inquired, pointing with a jerky gesture to the busts.

"Yes," the sculptor answered huskily, wholly mystified by the stranger's peculiar manner.

"Then I would like to speak with you," the other added.

Genaro, with a qualm in his unbreakfasted stomach, asked himself what mischance had befallen him now.

"You'll excuse my familiarity, I hope," the stranger went on as he drew forth a silver cigarettes case and proffered it to the Italian.

Reassured a little, the latter took a cigarette, and then availed himself of the match which his visitor also offered from a silver case.

Grazia di dio! this man seemed lined with silver, and at this moment there were just six red sulphur matches in the tin box by the kitchen stove.

"You've got a child," resumed the stranger, after a puff that seemed to invigorate him; "wife, no doubt, and altogether a home, though not a luxurious one," and he glanced about with a shrug at the desolate apartment. "You won't laugh, then, I think, when I tell you that I'm in love—really in love, not fancy-smitten or befooled by the coquetry of a pair of eyes or naked shoulders—will you?"

"No, signor," answered the sculptor—with a start, but it was because the baby made a sudden leap backwards.

"Thank you," returned the other, in a lower tone, and letting his chin fall rather shamefacedly. "It was about six months ago, on a Saturday, that went to the Cosmopolis Bank to draw on my business account. By the way, have you ever been in there? Do you know where it is?"

"I don't," the sculptor answered, laconically, as he patted Rafaelo soothingly, who was fast tiring of the stranger's keen, gray-eyed visage.

"After all, it's immaterial. I need only tell you that the main window of the paying-teller is on a right angle from the ladies' window. As I was handing in my check I looked up, and beheld at the opposite window the most mysteriously beautiful face of a woman my eyes ever saw. She was receiving cash from the second teller and in an instant had vanished.

"Mind, my view of her was but limited. I could see her just vaguely behind the grating, and I imagined she was looking at me. The same thing had happened twenty times before with other faces; but now I begged the teller to hurry my change. I rammed it all into my pockets

like so much newspaper and hastened around to the ladies' department.

"She had gone!

"Out in the street I went, up and down each block, always eager, impatient, resolved to rediscover her, and yet hardly sure I would be able to recognize if I saw her.

"It was twelve o'clock when I left the bank, it was four when I ceased searching and went home disconsolate.

"For weeks I haunted Union Square but unavailingly. Then business called me to Paris. I was glad to get away, hoping to forget those marvelous burning eyes, that saintly face that seemed more angelic than womanly.

"It seems ridiculous, I know, yet it's true, that once when sipping my liquor at a cafe, brilliant with light and laughter and women's jewels and their eyes, will you believe it, that I fancied I saw that face shooting swiftly past me on the street. I followed it for twenty minutes, hoping and hopeless, and then finally came back to my rooms still seeking, tired, dead tired of seeking.

"It has come up before me in my dreams resembling a picture I once saw in Rome, and I have confounded the vision of Raphael with the reality, the fleeting, mocking, shadow reality of my heart."

The visitor had dropped his cigarette smoldering to the floor. He was standing half inclined towards Genaro, who trembled at his vehemence and patted the baby most assiduously to prevent an outcry.

The door was flung open and Genaro's wife flew in.

"Sit down," continued the stranger more calmly, noticing the pale quivering sculptor, tottering, as it seemed, beneath the swaying weight of the baby.

Genaro helped himself to the only four-legged chair he had.

"Seeing that I could not rid myself of this glorious, heart-ruining phantom," resumed the stranger, "I was almost glad to return to New York, where at least I might haunt Union Square in hopes of recovering her.

"The first thing almost that struck my sight was this bust"—he had taken one of them in his hands and was gazing at it in a kind of fierce rapture. "It appeared to me almost insane that I should find a resemblance in the bit of plaster up for sale in the doorway of an empty store. And yet it was so like her, I began to think my obsession had set a nerve in my brain ajar. But again I could not help but recognize the same superb pose of the neck, the delicate aspirate nostrils tinted like pink shells.

"I inquired of the peddler who had made the piece. He did not know and referred me to the wholesale jobbers, who in turn directed me to you.

"I feel happy now; I almost foretaste the bliss of meeting with the woman whose shadow I have pursued for six months with a heart full of fire. I'll buy every single bit you can make of her. I'll be the means of your fortune and fame, for I have the power to do it, and all I ask in return is to know where I may find this girl who has maddened me, that I may reach her, seize, possess her."

He stopped abruptly and stammered under his breath: "God, how I love her!"

With this his lips dropped in a swift passionate kiss on the half-opened mouth of the statue. Then suddenly recalling himself he glanced up apologetically towards the sculptor.

"Jesu Christo!" screamed Genaro, in a very volcano of rage as he pitched the baby into the cradle as if it were a wooden doll.

Rafaelo emitted a piercing yell when his tender little skull cracked against the side of his bed, and before either of the men could change their expression of mutual perplexity, the door was flung open and Genaro's wife flew in, her eyes bloodshot from her rudely awakened slumber, her long ebony tresses flowing down over her bared neck and breast.

"My darling," she screamed, rushing to the cradle and catching up Rafaelo's sobbing form.

She had seen nothing but the cradle, and her child in pain. As she turned in full view of the stranger a hot blush started in the blue veins of her throat and overspread her face the hue of a blood orange.

The stranger staggered against the mantel, knocking down one of the busts, which crashed at his feet. He remained tottering, like a man struggling against the effects of a drug.

Genaro, appreciating his distress, motioned to his wife, who retired nestling the convulsive infant to her bosom and inwardly marveling at this miracle.

"Mr. Genaro," gasped the stranger, recovering after a few moments. "I—I humbly beg your pardon."

His voice fell almost to a gasp, and the last word came from his lips as with the agony of one dying. He held out his hand, which the sculptor took tremblingly.

Then he hesitated, as if seeking some sentence, sign or means of expressing the tumult of astonishment, regret, desolation that swirled in his soul like a maelstrom.

Once or twice his lips parted as if to speak, but no sound issued from them. Taking his hat, he opened the door, and noticed the broken bust.

"Let me pay you for that," he murmured in a pleading tone, meanwhile drawing forth a banknote.

Genaro hung back unwillingly.

"Then let me at least make the baby a present," he added, swiftly dropping the bill, and as instantly his tall, ulstered form shot from the room like a shadow.

A STRANGE CASE

By MRS. HELEN W. PIERSON

THE sound of the pistol-shot still echoed through the house. He felt that it would echo through his brain forever.

There was a sound of hurrying feet.

"Say it was an accident," he gasped, as he dropped on his knees at her side, "for God's sake, say it was an accident!"

A slow surprise dawned in his wife's dark eyes. "Why—what else could I say?" she whispered faintly.

"Oh, I don't know," he cried, "my brain is reeling. I don't know what I am saying, I——"

The door opened.

It was a misty, sunless day outside, but to those that entered, that room seemed full of sunshine. A soft, yellow glow pervaded it. Curtains of Shebarri silk in gold and amber faintly stirred at the windows. The tapestry was yellow, enwrought with gold, and on the floor lay white-and-gold colored rugs. On the couch, covered with white fur rugs, was extended the prostrate form of a young woman—straight and rigid in her white woolen gown as one dead. Her eyes were closed. An amber comb had fallen from her long, dark hair, and the curls lay in tangled waves on the heap of yellow silk cushions which had been hastily pushed under her head. But there was something at her throat that was not in tone with the symphony of color in the room. A dark, red stain discolored the costly, antique lace knotted about her slender neck.

Yet she was not pale! The sight of her was all the more pitiful, because strange roses still bloomed on her haggard cheeks, and her lips were livid under the carnation dye.

"Oh, my lamb! Oh, my heabenly master!" cried a stout, colored woman, pushing forward and falling on her knees by the couch; "is you killed, honey? Speak to your own auntie. Is yo' killed?"

She was about to gather the young woman's rigid form to her ample bosom, but the young husband drew her back.

"Don't touch her, Aunt Selah," he said, "she is wounded. She must not be moved till the doctor comes! Some one go for a doctor, quick—any one, the nearest, so he comes soon!"

He buried his face in his shaking hands. His brain was reeling. Was he in some ghastly nightmare, and would he waken out of this terrible tragedy to common, every-day life again? He had chafed at the monotony of it; but, oh God! give him back the slow uneventful days—give him back yesterday. A slender girl's figure bent over the prostrate form. She bathed the set face gently with cologne. The false roses fled and left a death-like pallor.

"Don't give way, Floyd; it may not be serious. See—I think she is coming around. I'm sure I saw her eyelids quiver just now."

He looked up into the girl's face. It was a ravishingly lovely face framed in red-gold hair. The deep-set gray eyes were sad and sweet, and full of tender radiance. Her pale cheeks flushed under his glance like a warm white rose. The folds of her violet silk gown swept against him, and he shrank away and caught his breath. The soft chiffon ruche about her white throat seemed to throb with the beating of her heart.

His face was white and drawn. "Oh, Gerry, if I could do something! Must we stand here and see her die, and do nothing? If I cannot do something I shall go mad!"

Some of the women were sobbing; others were whispering about the affair.

"Whaffer yo' all stand 'bout yere?" cried Aunt Selah, in sudden wrath. "My chile gwine be skeered to deff when she dun open her eyes. G'wan out o' yere!"

The old woman was a privileged character, but this was going too far.

Just then the doctor entered, tall, gray-headed, with the wisdom of years in his face.

"The room must be cleared," were his first words, as he looked at the excited group.

"I am her husband," said Floyd Dunbar, rising. Aunt Selah sat down and folded her arms.

"I'se gwine to stay yere!" she said firmly. "Dey ain't nobody in de heaven above, or in de airth beneaf, nor in de water undah de airth, wot kin keep me out. I nuss dat yer chile from de day she was bawned!"

"Very well; you two only," said the doctor, as he proceeded deftly to examine the wounded woman.

As he loosened the scarf at her neck, Floyd Dunbar turned away. The air seemed suddenly exhausted in the room. He went to the window. He drew back the curtain, and pushed aside the great yellow jardinière, full of white Easter lilies. He needed to quaff great draughts of fresh air to cool his fevered pulses. He leaned far out of the window, and gazed with half unseeing eyes upon the landscape. It was a misty day in early spring. The sky was blurred with vapor. Dew clung like rain upon the chestnut trees, with their bursting cones of white bloom. In the orchard, a summer snow of apple blossoms fell on the grass. A hollow, brimmed with hyacinths, seemed to swim away in a mist of blueness before his eyes.

But there was a gleam of violet beneath the chestnut trees that was not a flower. The breeze that had just begun to grow was swaying the folds of a violet gown.

Floyd Dunbar turned away quickly from the window.

A faint voice was calling him. His wife was conscious. "Floyd—where—is—Floyd?" He knelt beside her.

"I—I am better," she said. She still spoke with great difficulty and in whispers. "I will be—well—soon. Don't be—frightened—poor boy."

The doctor was going. He made a sign to Floyd to follow.

"I must leave you a moment," he said, leaning over his wife and touching her damp brow with his lips.

"I'se right yere, honey," said Aunt Selah. "I gwine tek cah of yo'—you'se all right now."

The door closed on the retreating figures. Mrs. Dunbar's face contracted with pain.

"No—you must not stay. Go—go—quick," she whispered. "I must know what the doctor says. He will not tell me—I must know."

"'Deed I gwine to stay right still, honey," said the

old woman stoutly. "Doan yo' go a-heavin' of yo'self in the face of Providence, my lily lamb! Yo' gwine git well sho nuff."

"If you love me—go!" pleaded Mrs. Dunbar. "I shall be worse—I shall worry myself in a fever if you don't."

The old woman sat still, stroking the little cold hands.

"I sholy gwine to stay right yere, honey," she said, with quiet decision.

"Then—I—must go—myself." The fruitless attempt to move filled Aunt Selah with terror.

"Oh, my Heavenly Marster," she cried, springing to her feet, and awkwardly stumbling over a white tabouret, on which stood an alabaster vase full of yellow daffodils. They dropped and lay on the floor like fallen stars.

"Oh, my baby—oh, my lily lamb, doan' yo' move. Doan yo' know yo' got a lead ball in yo', an' it muss'n' rastle roun'? I'se gwine go ter once, only doan yo' move."

"Go very softly—don't let them hear you. Listen what the doctor says—and come back and tell me quick."

Aunt Selah waddled out. She meant to keep her own counsel.

Mrs. Dunbar lay there motionless. Only her eyes roved restlessly about the room. She had furnished the house according to her ideas when she had come there a bride three years before. The money had all been hers, so she had been able to indulge every whim.

"It cannot be that I am going to die." The pulses of life seemed to freeze at the thought. "Love is stronger than death, and I love him so! I do not feel much pain. I do not feel at all. I am numb—numb as if I were half dead already. But I will not die. The world is so beautiful—life is so sweet! Life and love! Some one writes: 'Man does not yield even to death save through the weakness of his own will.' My will is strong. I am resolved to live! I will live!"

Aunt Selah was coming back. She panted like a strong swimmer in buffeting waves. Her black face was that ashen pallor peculiar to people of her race in suffering or terror. Her thick lips quivered pitifully when she tried to speak. When she stood by her young mistress, she contorted her mouth into a ghastly smile.

"Hit's all right, honey!" she gasped; "yo' gwine git well suttenly, he say. I hear 'em talk 'bout some Aunty Mortem. Reckon she's wot dey call a train nuss. She ain'ter gwine train 'bout yere, now I tole yo'. Dey ain't no aunty comin' to nuss my chile but her own Aunty Selah, an' so I gwine tole 'em p'intedly."

Winifred Dunbar understood. She had heard her death warrant! Youth and hope and life were going! Damp funeral airs blew about her. She seemed to feel the clods fall on her coffin. The yellow glow died out of the room, and walls of inky blackness enfolded her. She sank down, down through endless spaces into a gulf of gloom.

The sun was shining again. All the cloudy domes and pillars had melted away like snow wreaths before it. Winifred Dunbar had been carried to her own room and laid upon her bed. When she opened her eyes, she saw the sunshine streaming in the window, for the doctor had pushed aside the blue India silk curtains. That was a room fit for summer siestas, with its cool tints of cerulean blue and white, like summer skies.

Some one sat by her bedside writing. What was it? Oh, they were taking down her statement of the accident. But there was a bird singing at the very window. The happy, jubilant notes floated into her room. She stopped speaking to listen. How gray the birds were, while the light of her life was going out. To-morrow they would sing as cheerily; while—she—ah—to-morrow! Her eyes grew dim. Her heart palpitated with infinite pity for her own fate. So young—so beloved.

There were only four people in the room. The grave lawyer who sat by the bedside, the doctor who stood looking out of the window and Floyd and Geraldine.

Her husband had retreated as if he could hear no more, when her weak, faltering voice commenced the tale of woe. He stood near Geraldine who looked as white as some sculptured saint.

Winifred's eyes kindled a little. She had found that the swinging mirror at the foot of the bed reflected that beloved form still. The sun of her life had not set, although he had withdrawn a little.

"I will read what I have taken down so far," said the lawyer in his grave, passionless voice. "'I, Winifred Dunbar, being about to die, do declare and affirm——'"

"About to die!" It seemed as if she was hearing the words coldly enough. They did not seem to belong to her. Ah! how the sunshine lit up that red-gold hair of Geraldine's till it looked like an aureole of flame!

The lawyer read on: "'I declare and affirm that on the morning of the fifteenth of April, at about eleven o'clock, I entered my boudoir, commonly known as the yellow room. I did not know my husband was there. He had brought a new revolver to show me the evening before, and had left it there. He had just remembered it. He held it in his hand, but I did not notice it. I moved softly so that he did not hear my entrance. I meant to play a child's trick by stealing behind him and covering his eyes with my hands to make him guess who was there.' That is correct so far, is it not?" asked the lawyer.

"Yes," she responded absently, her eyes fixed on the mirror.

"Will you kindly finish it," he said.

"You know I told you it was an accident?" she said querulously.

Suddenly her face contracted with a spasm of pain. Her eyes dilated. A flame leaped into them as if kindled by a live coal. Her heart bounded like a wild beast in a cage. What had she seen?

Only a furtive touch of the hand, only a glance that had flashed like lightning from eye to eye.

"Quick, the cordial!" cried the lawyer, noting the change.

Floyd sprang to his wife's side and moistened her lips.

"I am better," she said in a strangely strong, vibrating voice. Jealousy, stronger than death, had kindled anew the dying flame of life.

"I can go on now," she said. "I did not reach my husband to play that child's trick. He saw me—he took steady aim—he shot me——"

"As you said—by accident?"

"No!" she cried passionately, "*it was not an accident!*"

Floyd Dunbar uttered a cry of horror and astonishment. "Her mind is gone—she is raving. Winnie, my wife, for God's sake, take that back! You don't know what you are saying! Look at me! Try to remember."

Winifred's eyes rested on her husband. They seemed to shoot out glances fierce as flames. Her face quivered.

"The living may lie, but the dying speak the truth. When I said—it was—an accident I thought I might live—and I meant to shield him. Now I am—dying. I will speak out; he meant to kill me—he loves another; he wants to be free!"

With these words the flame flickered and went out in her eyes. The hot pulsations of that mutinous heart grew fainter. The forms about her floated away like shadows. A black pall dropped over the sunlight and all was dark, but upon the frozen lips of the dead woman the phantom of a smile flickered as though she still tasted the sweetness of her revenge.

STORY OF THE RUE DE LA HARPE

IN the Rue de la Harpe, which is a long, dismal, ancient street in the fauxbourg of St. Marcell, is a space or gap in the line of building, upon which formerly stood two dwelling-houses. Now it holds a melancholy memorial, signifying that upon this spot no human habitation shall ever be erected, no human being ever must reside!

Curiosity will, of course, be greatly excited to ascertain what it was that rendered this spot so noxious to humanity and yet so interesting to history.

Two neighbors residing in some province not very remote from the French capital, having occasion to go to town for certain money transactions, agreed to travel thence and to return together, which was to be done with as much speed as possible. They were on foot—a very common way, even at present, for persons of much respectability to travel in France—and were attended by a faithful dog.

Upon their arrival at the Rue de la Harpe they stepped into the shop of a barber to be shaved before proceeding on their business. So limited was their time and so peremptory was their return that the first man who was shaved proposed to his companion that, while he was undergoing the operation of a razor, the other would run to execute a small commission in the neighborhood, promising that he would be back before the other was ready. For this purpose he left the shop of the barber.

On returning, to his great surprise and vexation, he was informed that his friend was gone; but as the dog of the absentee was sitting outside the door, the other presumed he had only gone for a moment. Expecting him back every moment, he chatted to the barber while he watched his return.

A considerable time elapsed. The stranger now became quite impatient; he went in and out, up and down the street; still the dog remained stationed at the door.

"Did he leave no message?"

"No"; all the barber knew was "that when he was shaved he went away."

"It was very odd."

The dog remaining stationed at the door was conclusive evidence that his master was not far off. The man went in and out and up and down the street again. Still no sign of his friend.

Impatience now became alarm. The dog exhibited marks of restlessness in yelps and in howlings, which so affected the stranger that he threw out some insinuations not much to the credit of "monsieur," the barber. An altercation ensued, and the traveler was indignantly ordered by the barber to quit his boutique.

Upon quitting the shop he found it impossible to get the dog from the door. No whistling, no calling, no patting would do; stir he would not.

The man raised a crowd about the door, to whom he told his story. The dog became an object of universal interest. He shivered and howled, but no seduction, no caressing could make him desert his post.

By some of the populace it was proposed to send for the police, by others a remedy more summary was proposed, namely, to force in the door and search the house, which was immediately done. The crowd burst in, every apartment was searched—but searched in vain. There was no trace whatsoever of the countryman.

During this investigation the dog still remained sentinel at the door, which was bolted within to keep out the crowd.

After fruitless search and much altercation the barber prevailed upon those who had forced in to quit his house. He came to the door and was haranguing the populace, declaring most solemnly his innocence, when the dog suddenly sprang upon him, flew at his throat with such a terrific exasperation that his victim fainted and was with the greatest difficulty rescued from being torn to pieces. The dog seemed in a state of fury.

It was now proposed to give the animal his way, to see what course he would pursue. The moment he was let loose he flew through the shop and started down-stairs into a dark cellar, where he set up the most dismal howling.

Lights being procured, an aperture was discovered in the wall communicating to the next house, which was immediately surrounded, and in the cellar was found the body of the unfortunate man who had been missing. The person who kept this shop was a *patissiere*, or pastry cook.

It is unnecessary to say those miscreants were brought to trial and executed. The facts that appeared upon that trial and afterwards upon the confession were these:

Those incautious travelers, while in the shop of the barber, talked of the money they had about them, and the wretch, who was a robber by profession, killed and plundered him.

This case was of so terrific a nature it was made part of the sentence of the law that, besides the execution of those monsters, the house in which they perpetrated those infernal deeds should be pulled down and that the spot on which they stood should be marked out to posterity with horror and with execration.

A WONDERFUL TREE.

IN far-off Persia there grows a shrub which is called the sorrowful tree. Another name for this tree is the night jessamine or the sad tree. The reason why it is called the sad or sorrowful tree is because it blooms only at night.

When the first star appears in the sky, the first bud opens on the wonderful tree. As the evening advances, the buds open more rapidly until the tree is covered with a delicate bloom and it appears like a vast flower. The bloom is quite fragrant and the odor is like the perfume of the evening primrose. As the stars begin to grow dim and the dawn approaches, the flowers begin to fade, and by the time the sun has risen not a flower can be found on the tree.

During the hours of daylight the tree appears to be withering as if it had been injured in some manner; but in reality it is simply regaining strength in order to put out new blossoms on the following night.

This tree is held in high esteem by the natives of the country where it grows, and is looked upon as a curiosity by florists throughout the world. When cut down, these trees send up sprouts from the roots that will mature into a flowering tree in a very short time.

CURRENT NEWS

DIGS UP PETRIFIED SKULL.

A petrified human head was unearthed on a farm near Virginia, Minn., by Irvin Friedichs, who dug a root cellar recently. The skull is white, weighs eight and one-half pounds, and is perfect in formation. The teeth are distinguishable and the features are plain. Local archæologists are of the belief that it is the head of an Indian, buried centuries ago. The specimen has been sent to the University of Minnesota.

COUGARS SLAIN IN CELLAR.

Jack Gordon, an Upper Valley ranchman of Oregon, killed two cougars recently under his back porch.

Attracted by the barking of his collie, Mr. Gordon, when he saw the animals from a window, thought them other dogs. On peering into the half-basement under the porch and receiving a snarl from one of the big cats he barred the basement door and lost no time in getting his rifle.

Mr. Gordon shot at the glare of the cougars' eyes and put bullets through the heads of both. Mr. Gordon is $70 richer in bounty money and the value of the skins.

A LAND OF MANY REPTILES.

Australia is supplied with 100 species of snakes, three-fourths of them venomous. The big pythons and rock-snakes are harmless, says the *National Geographical Magazine*, but as one travels from the tropics southward the dangerous varieties increase in numbers, and in Tasmania all are venomous, though only five are really deadly, and, fortunately, these are rarely seen.

The continent is also abundantly supplied with lizards. Three hundred and ninety species are recorded, and they may be seen not only in woods and prairies and deserts, in the water, among rocks and in trees, but also in the less frequented city streets.

WOMAN A SHARPSHOOTER.

Camp Shelby, Hattiersburg, Miss., boasts of the first woman to qualify as a sharpshooter in the American Army—and she hails from Kentucky.

Mrs. Jackson Morris, wife of Major Morris, former Secretary to the Governor of Kentucky, holds the honor. With the heavy regulation Springfield rifle used in the army, she made 45 hits out of a possible 50 at 600 yards, and with the automatic revolver she sent a stream of lead into the target at 70 paces, all hits so close together they could be covered with a dime.

Now Mrs. Morris is on the range as an instructor and under orders from Uncle Sam.

STAMP OF 1876 HONORED.

Shortly after the new 3-cent postal rate went into effect, post-office officials at Washington, D. C., discovered a 3-cent stamped envelope of the centennial series of 1876. It was mailed by a Washington resident to some one in Philadelphia. It was honored as good postage and was permitted to go through after a careful scrutiny, although issued at an altogether different period and for a different purpose than that of the present 3-cent rate.

The old stamp was a green and white shield design. At the top was "1776" and at the bottom "1876." A horse and rider and a railway postal car were shown in relief. At the time that stamp was issued and until 1883, the postal rate was 3 cents for a half ounce, twice as much as the present rate.

IN TEXAS OVER A CENTURY.

Thankful chiefly for the pleasant sunshine of the day, Mrs. Narcissa Yarbrough Burns enjoyed a bountiful turkey day feast in joint celebration of the Thanksgiving Day with her 111th birthday.

A native of Tennessee, Mrs. Burns has lived in Texas 109 years, has seen seven wars begin and six end, and is hopeful of living through to the finish of the present one. The authenticity of her age claim has been definitely established by research in recent years.

At present Mrs. Burns is living in Houston Heights, a suburb of Houston, Tex. With her lives her "baby" daughter, Mrs. Mary Thomas, ninety years old.

HENS HAD WAR GARDEN.

A. A. Arnold, Superintendent of Parks, Mansfield, O., has a flock of hens that planted, cultivated and raised a war garden that produced a peck of potatoes. The largest potato weighed 17 ounces, the next 16 ounces.

The owner says that when potatoes were selling for $4.25 a bushel last spring his wife was so economical she pared the potatoes as thin as she possibly could, then fed the thin parings to the chickens. Instead of eating the parings the chickens planted them in the barnyard.

All summer long the fowls not only kept the weeds down in their war garden, but kept the bugs off. These patriotic chickens did their bit to win the war by raising thirty-four potatoes from three stalks that came up from the thin parings which they conserved.

DOG COMMITS SUICIDE.

The wonderful extent of the mother love of a dog was shown in a striking manner by Fannie, a Yorkshire terrier, the mascot of the steamship *Navajo*, a Standard Oil tanker, abandoned afire at sea recently.

Fannie was the mother of six cute little puppies. Her devotion to her family had been commented upon by the officers and crew of the *Navajo*. They said they never had witnessed so much motherly care bestowed by a dog. When the vessel blazed up and the lifeboats were being lowered Fannie was seen rushing about carrying two of the puppies between her teeth. She finally put them down in what she must have considered a place of safety and ran to bring her own puppies there.

By the time she arrived with the second consignment she found the fire approaching dangerously near her loved ones. When she discovered the fire drawing nearer and nearer, in a rapidly decreasing circle, she appeared to become crazed with anguish and excitement. Howling piteously, she licked the face of each of the puppies and then leaped into the sea.

GETS $3,247 FOR CLOVER SEED.

A check for $3,247.17, the largest amount ever paid in the world for one wagon load of clover seed, has been paid to W. H. Askew, a farmer living near Casselton, N. Dak. Mr. Askew planted 65 acres to medium red clover last spring, which yielded 3½ bushels to the acre of bright, choice seed.

LAYS 289 EGGS IN YEAR.

Hen No. 707, owned by Dr. R. Lindsey Ireland, of Louisville, Ky., is announced as the winner of the year's national egg laying contest at the Kentucky experiment station here. She laid 289 eggs and was for a time believed on the way to break the world's record of 314. The lighter breeds outlayed the heavier practically throughout the entire year, the records showed.

OLD INDIAN RELICS.

A scientific expedition, organized by the Smithsonian Institution and the American Museum of the American Indian, which has been excavating among the Zuni ruins of Hawikuh in Western New Mexico, has exhumed a number of valuable Indian relics dating back to the early sixteenth century. Profusely decorated pottery, baskets, tribal regalia and war implements were found in graves.

KANSAS' OLDEST CAT IS DEAD.

Fuzz is dead. Fuzz held the undisputed distinction of being the oldest cat in Wichita, Kan. For twenty-one years he had been the foe of all rats and rodents that attempted to pay a temporary visit to the house in the vicinity of 532 Ida avenue. He also held the heavyweight championship feline honors of that district. Fuzz was owned by J. S. Simon, a post-office employee, and had made his home with the family for more than a score of years. Mr. Simon declared that the death of the cat made him feel as though he had lost one of his best friends.

ELECTRICIANS WANTED IN THE ARMY.

The United States Army needs electricians and men of many other trades such as iron workers, automobile mechanics, etc., to serve in the army along the lines of their civilian occupations in this country and abroad. Enlistment is open to citizens of the United States or to those who have declared their intention of becoming citizens. They must be between the ages of eighteen and forty-five years and have no one depending upon them for support. Men who can qualify for the above positions will be examined physically at recruiting headquarters, 357 Broadway, New York City. Military training is not required, nor are strictly military duties exacted except in emergencies.

SUIT MADE FROM PEAT FIBER?

A process is stated to have been perfected in Sweden for the manufacture of a strong textile material from peat fiber. The inventor, an engineer named Jegeaus, began to study this process twenty years ago, but was hampered by the fact that the manufacture was much too costly, so that he was unable to turn his ideas to any practical use. Induced by war conditions, however, he resumed his experiments, and has now succeeded in making dress materials from peat on a large scale.

The prices of these fabrics are said to be somewhat lower than those for artificial wool, and the durability great. The inventor himself and several other persons are already wearing "peat" clothing, and a factory for the working of the process is about to be erected.

SOLDIER WHO CAN'T READ GETS 1,200 LETTERS.

As a warning to the public to disregard published stories that men in the army training camps are without food, unhappy and lonesome, the War Department made public to-day a letter from Postmaster Wolfe at Chillicothe, O., dealing with a specific case. He said:

"A syndicate of newspapers had published a story about a soldier with his picture, saying he was lonesome and had not received any mail since being in camp." The postmaster adds:

"In one mail alone he received 1,200 letters, nineteen special delivery letters and parcels and fifty-four ordinary parcels. He can neither read nor write.

MATHEMATICAL PRODIGY.

A child wonder with unusual mental powers has been discovered in the first grade West State street school, New Haven, Conn.

He is Master Roy York, aged six, son of F. L. York, a well-driller, residing on Franklin avenue. While bright in all his school work, the youngster is a prodigy in mathematics.

He knows the calendar by heart and although given the most severe questions with regard to days and dates never makes a mistake. If you tell him your age he can tell in a second the year you were born, and if you give him the date of your birthday, and ask him what day of the week it comes on he replies at once, correctly and without fail.

His ability cannot be attributed to mental telepathy, for in many instances he tells the days of dates in last year's calendar, which, when you look them up, you find are right.

Although not customary to teach children the months and abbreviations of months, Roy had them mastered when he went to kindergarten, and the remarkable feature is that he was never cornered.

He is also lightning fast in problems which deal with addition and subtraction of the calendar, and catch questions are easily solved.

FINGER-PRINTING AGES OLD.

Finger-printing has been found the most efficient of all methods to keep track of criminals, and it is now being used for other purposes. Apparently it was the newest of all the new things in the world, but a faculty member of the Field Museum, Chicago, now asserts that finger-printing was understood and used by the Chinese of a thousand years and more ago.

The educator cites the Persian historian, Rashid-eddin, as describing the finger-printing system in 1303. Even then it was an ancient custom in China. He also quotes an Arabian merchant, one Soleiman, who stated in 851 that it was a practice among the Chinese for the debtor to leave the marks of his fingers upon a promissory note. This would clearly indicate that the Chinese of that time fully understood that the fingers of no two persons bore the same markings. It was an incontrovertible way of procuring an acknowledgment. A signature might be disputed—but never a finger-print.

The Chicago investigator also takes notice of two contracts bearing the debtor's finger-prints, with an appended note saying that this was the person who had permitted his finger impressions to be taken. This was a kind of affidavit. One of the contracts bore the date of 782 and the other of 786, and both were executed in China.

So the criminal investigator of to-day is merely employing a hoary method known in the dim reaches of the past. Which proves again that there really is nothing new beneath the sun.

WORLD'S DEEPEST WELL.

Gas men throughout Northwestern Pennsylvania are waiting with much interest the final result of drilling operations at the two deep test wells located at Kersey and McDonald, both Pennsylvania towns.

The Geary well, at McDonald, is almost twice as deep as the one at Kersey, having reached a depth of 7,218 feet, which makes it the second deepest in the world. The world's deepest well is in Roumania, and is 7,300 feet deep, but it is likely that the Geary well will make a new world's record.

Its promoters already have spent $300,000 in the venture, and another $100,000 is to be invested before it is abandoned. When the drill reached a depth of 7,110 feet a strain of rock salt over 100 feet thick was discovered.

A "WIRELESS" ON HORSEBACK.

There are several forms of wireless equipment used on the western front, and under favorable conditions a range of 150 to 200 miles is possible with one of them. The most easily handled wireless "station," however, is the cavalry type, which weighs about 640 pounds, and is carried in equal proportions by four horses. Its range is not very great; it works over a distance of from twenty-five to thirty miles.

The engine and dynamo are mounted on opposite sides of a rigid saddle on the first horse, together with four gallons of petrol and a quart of lubricating oil, tools, spare parts and a telescoping driving shaft. The second horse carries the transformer—which changes the current to a lighter or lower voltage—in a wooden case, and in another wooden case the receiver, while the third horse carries the masts, which in some cases are in sections and in others are made on a telescoping principle. The fourth horse carries halyards, stays and the aerial wires, which are wound around drums and packed away in a fiber case.

IMPREGNABLE BANK VAULT.

One of the largest and strongest bank vaults in the world was put into commission recently in the new Fifth Avenue Branch of the Guaranty Trust Company, at the corner of Forty-third street, New York.

The main door of this vault weighs nearly forty tons and looks like the polished steel breechlock of a great gun. It is so accurately balanced, however, that it can be swung to and fro by a hand pressure. The combination of the vault is not on the door, but on the jamb, at one side. This is the latest handicap that the safe-maker has placed on the safe-breaker. The mechanism of the combination might be blown away by some powerful explosive without impairing the impregnability of the safe.

Moreover, the combination can only be seen by the person who manipulates it. There are nearly 5,000 steel boxes in the vault room, arranged in tiers on the side. There are wall mirrors at the end of the cross aisles. They are an added element for protection, for everything can be seen in them from anywhere. Even the 2,000-ton central safe can be viewed on all sides by the means of diagonal mirrors.

UNCLE SAM'S MOVIES.

Official motion pictures bringing home the vital importance of increased food production will be shown by the United States department of Agriculture in hundreds of regular motion picture theaters throughout the United States. The first released film will show activities in the National Forests, which are important sources of timber and water supply and also afford grazing for a large number of cattle and sheep.

The second release will show what children through the pig clubs are doing to increase the supply of pork. Other selections from the department's 40,000 feet of official subjects will make clear various features of food production, the raising of meat animals and horses, and will deal with home activities such as poultry raising and the canning and drying of perishable products.

The department laboratories are at work on a number of other popular films specially designed to make clear to city as well as rural populations, problems of food production and to show them ways in which they can cooperate effectively to feed the nation and the Allies.

NEWEST TERROR OF THE AIR.

Germany has recently developed an airplane that is said to be almost invisible. By its use raids may be made without the raiding machine being exposed to fire from land batteries. If this achievement is perfected and results in producing an aeroplane that cannot be seen the effects are past calculations. Raiders might descend to within a short distance of the earth and destroy at their will, and still offer no target to the defenders.

Since the aeroplane became of practical utility scientists have racked their brains for some method of rendering it invisible. In this new machine of the Germans it is reported that the wings are wholly invisible at a distance, only the body remaining as a mark for the eye of enemies. This greatly reduces the visible bulk of the new plane, and thereby renders it just so much harder to see.

When the supply of cotton began to run low in Germany numerous substitutes were tried for the manufacture of aeroplane wings. Also cotton was highly inflammable, and the cloth had a tendency to become waterlogged when a plane was caught in the clouds during a storm. This made traveling more difficult.

A good many materials were tested without satisfactory results. Then the Germans are said to have hit upon the plan that may ultimately lead to a wholly invisible aeroplane. The wings of these new machines are manufactured out of a composition which depends upon a chemical casein. This chemical comes from a very common and somewhat surprising source—buttermilk. It is found in ordinary milk to a considerable extent, but more especially in buttermilk. It is easily extracted and after a drying process is reduced to a powder. This casein is then mixed with an equal quantity of crushed stone, having about the same consistency as talcum. Water is added and the whole forms a kind of paste that is very pliable and may be made into almost any desired form.

Before the war the Germans were using this preparation in the manufacture of knife handles and ornamental objects. In some cases it was made to so closely resemble ivory or horn that the difference was extremely hard to detect. There was a good deal of mystery as to the composition of the substitute, but American scientists have now determined that it is the same substance as Germany has now utilized in making invisible aeroplane wings.

The mixture of casein and stone is rolled into thin sheets of the desired size, and a wire netting spread between two of these sheets. They are then fastened together with a cement of the same mixture, forming a compact, non-inflammable, waterproof and invisible aeroplane wing. It seems possible that the body of the German machines may soon be covered with the substance, rendering the whole invisible at a distance.

If this result is accomplished it will mean the creation of a new mechanical terror such as the world has never known. If some way can be found—and that is highly probable—to silence an aeroplane's engines and propellers, raiders of the future may do their work without a sight or a sound to betray them.

SAW SON IN MOVIE.

When R. E. Washington, a hotel man of Charleston, W. Va., went into a moving picture theater he learned the whereabouts of his twenty-year-old son Lawrence, who disappeared from his home two years ago.

The film showed a picture of the dreadnought *Pennsylvania* in target practice in the Hampton Roads proving grounds, with Lawrence Washington manning one of the guns. The father recognized his son instantly.

The picture showed honors being conferred on the young man, who made three hits without a miss, as a result of which he was promoted from an ordinary seaman to chief gun pointer, with an increase of $8 in his monthly stipend.

The youth is a direct descendant of George Washington's brother Charles, for whom Charlestown, W. V., was named.

CALLED DEAD TWICE.

Peter Bauer, a piano salesman of Youngstown, Ohio, has survived the second announcement of this death. The latest was recently made in Pottsville, Pa., and the earlier one about five years ago in Cleveland. In both instances the erroneous announcements were the result of mistaken identities.

Bauer has just received a clipping from the *Pottsville Banner*, sent him by his brother, telling how he was supposed to have been drowned at Huron, Ohio. Bauer's insistence that he is very much alive means that the authorities must start all over trying to identify the body recently washed ashore at the Lake Erie port.

Five years ago a man who dropped dead on a Cleveland street was at first identified as Bauer. At that time he was living at Garfield, Ohio, and it was some time before he convinced the public that he was alive.

WARDENS SEEK SONGBIRD DESTROYERS.

Recently two protectors connected with the New York office were on their way home on the trolley cars going through Hempstead. Both were in uniform.

Two seats ahead of them an Italian was sitting with a suitcase beside him, and he also had a gun. He noticed the protectors entering the car. A short distance from Hempstead the Italian rose from his seat, took his gun, but paid no attention to the bag which was on the floor at his seat.

As he passed the protectors on his way out of the car they called his attention to the fact that he had left his bag behind. He replied that the bag was not his.

Thereupon one of the protectors took up the bag and both protectors followed the Italian out of the car. On the street they opened up the bag and found that it contained six flickers, nine robins, six brown thrushes, two song sparrows and one catbird.

The Italian protested that the bag was not his, but finally when he was taken before a justice of the peace for a preliminary examination he admitted to the protectors that he was the owner of the bag and that he had shot the contents of the bag during the day.

The protectors arraigned him before Judge E. T. Neu and charged him with possessing the songbirds. The defendant pleaded guilty to the charge, and Judge Neu imposed a fine of $75, which was paid by friends of the defendant.

JAPANESE VEGETABLE WAX.

Most of this vegetable wax is derived from the fruit kernals of a tree peculiar to Japan, which begins to fruit when about fifteen years of age and sometimes bears heavily when it is over one hundred years old. It reaches a height of 20 to 25 feet and produces from 30 to 150 pounds of nuts annually. The best wax is made from the nuts that have been kept over the winter, and, generally speaking, the quality of the product improves with the age of the nut. The wax is extracted by crushing, and steaming the nuts and then subjecting the mass to pressure. A second wax is secured by putting the mass through a second pressure. One workman can handle about 150 pounds of raw mass a day, and this produces about 16 pounds of wax. The principal regions of production are in the Island of Kyushu, especially around the city of Kukuoka, which accounts for nearly half the output. The product is used principally in the manufacture of polishes, pomade and soaps, and in dressing leather. The industry, which is said to be developing rapidly at this time, turns out a product valued at nearly $1,000,000 a year.

A MYSTERIOUS CAVE.

A cave was discovered a short time ago on White River, some thirty miles above Meeker, which seems to be as important a discovery of that kind as any ever made in Colorado. It was found by a prospector and hunter named Hooper, who reported it to the citizens of Meeker. But no one seemed particularly interested in the new find, as that portion of the country surrounding the headwaters of White River is full of curious things, and the settlers in that locality have become accustomed to them, and their curiosity is not easily aroused. Two gentlemen recently made an exploration of the cave, and found it in a limestone formation and extending into the mountain for half a mile or more.

The opening has the appearance of a railroad tunnel, twelve or fourteen feet wide. The cave continues at this width for considerable distance, when it grows narrower, and in one or two instances the explorers were obliged to stoop in following the passage. The opening is about sixteen feet above the river, and has the form of an incline.

When the party had reached a distance of a quarter of a mile, the floor sloped quite rapidly for two hundred yards, when they came to an abrupt drop. Rocks were thrown down and the presence of water ascertained. When one of the party was lowered, the distance that had seemed so great was only twelve feet, and not more than three inches of water was found on the floor of the cave.

The air was good, and they found that the passageway continued, and was followed some three hundred yards further when another drop of seven or eight feet was encountered. Here was a dry, sandy bottom in this cave, and the passageway was found to continue still farther, and was pursued thirty or forty yards farther, when they came to what was apparently the end of the tunnel. A stream of water two feet or more in diameter was rushing out of the wall at one side, cutting across the foot of the breast of the passageway, and, to all appearances, was lost in the wall on the other side. The stream was swift, and came out with great force, and, stranger yet, the water was quite hot, and, when tasted, was very much like the water found in the springs at Glenwood.

Where the water comes from and where it goes is a mystery that the explorers could not solve. Aside from the lime formation, the formation surrounding it is lava, and the supposition has been advanced that there is a crater in the vicinity filled up by crumbled walls of rock, which constantly discharges hot water, and during the course of ages has eaten its way down through a seam or crevice in the limestone to the river below. A few miles above Glenwood there are springs of a similar nature, which are situated almost in the bed of the Grand River. It is quite probable that further investigations will be made.

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